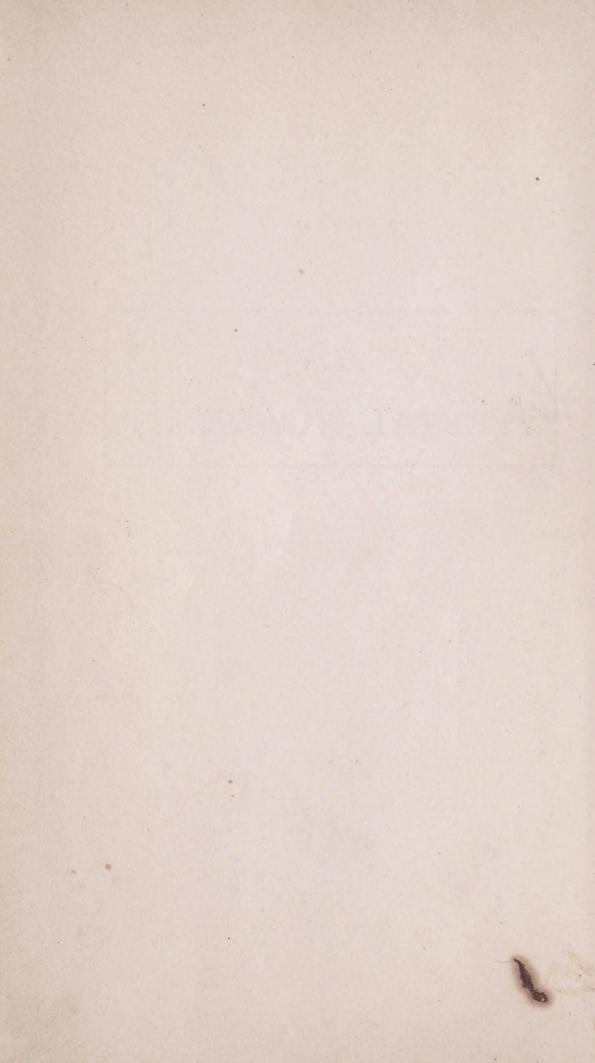
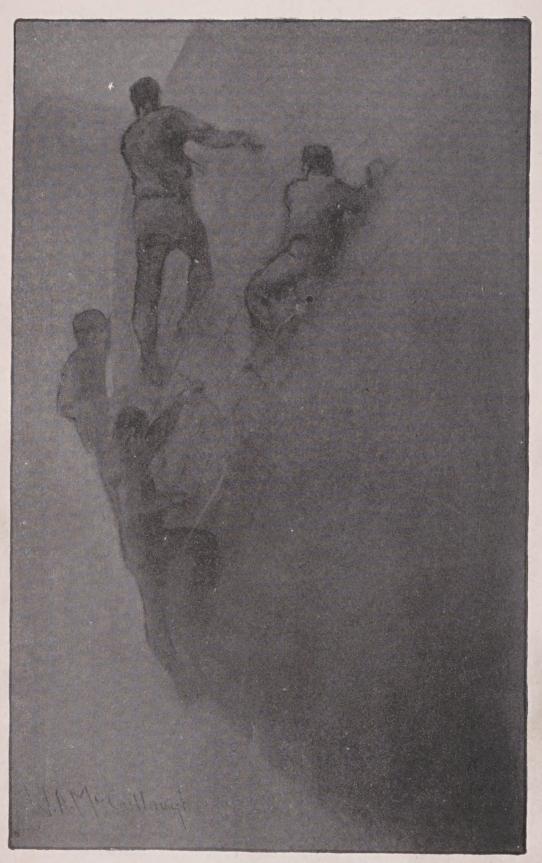




* AN * AËRIAL Runaway







"I CAN SEE OVER THE PEAK."
(See page 89.)

* AN * AËRIAL Runaway

The BALLOON ADVENTURES of ROD & TOD in NORTH & SOUTH AMERICA

W. P. & C. P. CHIPMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY
W. A. McCULLOUGH



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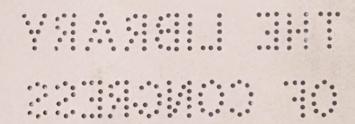
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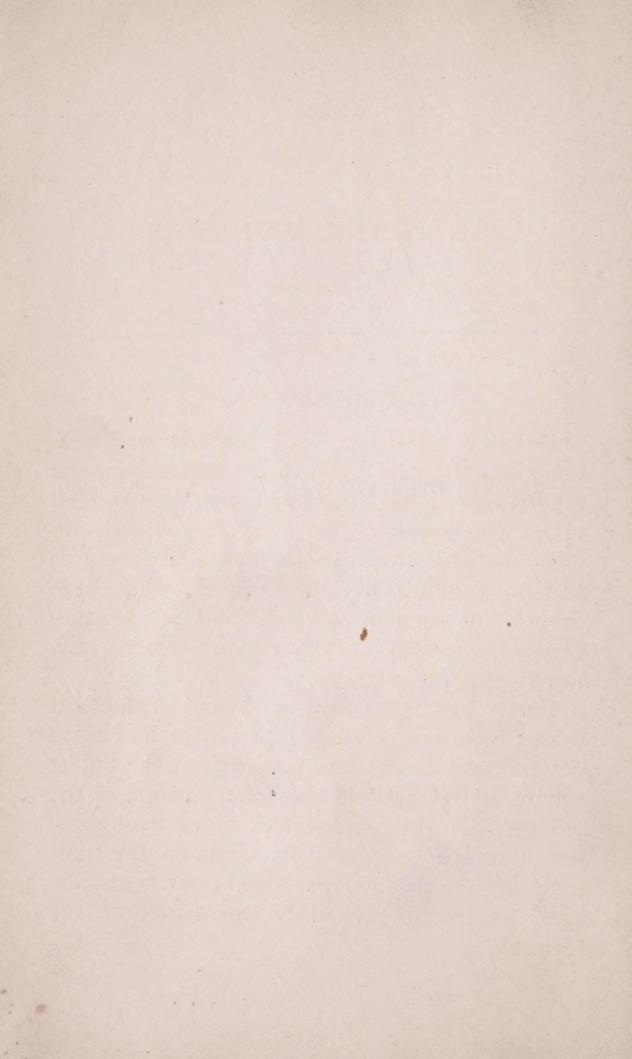
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An Aerial Runaway.

CHAPTER I.

ROD AND TODD.

It was a brave act. All Bayville was talking about it; and there were two things the inhabitants of the little town were fully agreed upon: the honor of the deed was equally divided between the two lads who achieved it; and no one but Rod and Todd would have thought of such an unusual and yet so eminently successful a way of preventing the threatening disaster.

Early that afternoon a stylish buckboard drawn by a pair of coal-black horses had come down North Street, and turned into the public square at the head of the main avenue of the village. On the back seat were two little girls, ten or twelve years of age; while on the front seat, driving the spirited steeds, sat a middle-aged gentleman, evidently the owner of the turnout.

illout.

At the watering trough that stood at the dividing of the streets, the man held up the horses for a drink. Though the cool and refreshing fluid bubbled and sparkled in an iron cylinder as high as the wagon bed, the tightly checked animals could not get their noses into it, and so the gentleman, throwing his reins carelessly over the dash, leaped from the vehicle and walked to the heads of the impatient beasts. Loosening the checks, he waited for them to quench their thirst, looking about him meantime with the curious interest of one who was a stranger to his surroundings.

His eye finally rested upon a young lady who was coming up South Avenue—the street just opposite the equipage—on her wheel. She rode rapidly and in a moment was at the square. Then a sudden gust of wind caught the broad brim of the hat she wore, and tore it from her head. Scaling as lightly and gracefully as a bird through the air, it landed in the fountain right in front of the drinking horses.

The next instant, and before the watching gentleman could do a thing to prevent the catastrophe, the frightened animals had wheeled to the left, and dashed off down the main avenue at a terrific rate of speed, the two little

girls clinging helplessly and hopelessly to the seat of the swaying and tossing wagon.

The street was straight as an arrow, and nearly a mile long. On either side were business blocks and dwellings; at its end was the steamboat wharf, and, directly off the dock, the deepest water of the bay.

At the moment the runaway began, there were a score of other teams on the avenue, and dozens of people on the sidewalks. In less than a minute every vehicle had disappeared into the side streets, and the passers-by had fled to the adjacent yards and stores. The dashing horses were given a full right of way.

The owner of the frightened animals had followed them down the avenue, unheeding the

cries that met him on every side.

"It's no use, sir! You can't stop those horses! They are bound to go off the dock!"

The morbid curiosity, that often takes possession of the human heart, to witness a disaster, even if one can do nothing to prevent its occurrence, now led a crowd of men, women, and children to hasten after the running father. So there were many to tell, ten minutes later, just how the threatening casualty had been averted.

About the time the horses began their wild

run two lads left the wharves, and started up the avenue on their bicycles. In friendly rivalry they constantly increased their speed, and were soon going up the street at a pace as rapid as that which marked the flight of the frightened steeds down it. Intent on their race they gave little heed to what was before them, until their quick ears caught the sound of the coming runaway. Then glancing quickly ahead, they saw the running horses, the swaying wagon, and the frightened girls; but unlike all the others on the street at that hour, their thought was not of personal safety, but of saving the endangered children.

"I say, Rod," one cried out the moment he caught sight of the coming team, "if those horses are not stopped, they'll go off the dock."

"That's so, Todd," assented his comrade;

"and so we must stop them."

"All right! we can go as fast as they can," rejoined the first speaker. "Let us turn around,

and be ready to run them down."

Quickly divining his chum's plan, Rod at once slackened his speed enough to enable him to circle across the broad street. Todd instantly followed his example, and, before the frightened animals were abreast of them, the boys had changed sides, and were speeding

back toward the quay, keeping, however, near the curbing. They glanced back over their shoulders occasionally, and regulated their pace so that the horses slowly gained upon them. When, however, the animals were nearly opposite, Todd said:—

"Now, Rod, ready! Run alongside of your horse and talk kindly to it. I'll do the same by this one. We'll keep close to them, and slowly quiet them down. We can do it before the wharf is reached."

It was a daring undertaking, requiring cool heads and steady nerves; but the lads proved equal to the task. Running up close to and moving parallel with the animals, they talked soothingly to them.

"Whoa there, Prince! Steady, old boy!"

"Their names are Duke and Sultan!" cried the elder girl in the wagon, who seemed to understand the purpose of the lads.

"Whoa there, Duke! Whoa, Sultan!" the boys called, quickly using the real names of the steeds.

The animals, usually kind and docile, soon slackened their speed under these words, and allowed their pursuers to come even nearer to them.

After a minute or two, and while they were still some rods from the dock, Rod said:—

"Let us try now to take them by the bits, Todd! I believe we can do it and stop them!"

"I'm ready," responded his comrade; "but we better keep on our wheels, and check them

slowly."

As he spoke, both lads forged ahead a little on their bicycles, and then, guiding them with a single hand, dexterously caught the loose reins of the horses close to the bits with their disengaged ones. Pulling gently now on the straps, they repeated their calls:—

"Whoa there, Duke! Whoa, Sultan!"

This they did several times over, each time increasing the strength of their pull upon the straps. Under their efforts the horses dropped first to a slow trot, then to a walk, and finally came to a standstill. It was, moreover, just in time, for the wharves were but a few feet away.

Leaping from their wheels, Todd held the horses, while Rod went to the assistance of the little girls. He had just carried them, one at a time, to the nearest sidewalk, when the younger

exclaimed: -

"There comes papa! There comes papa!"

In another minute, heated and dusty from his long run, the owner of the turnout came up. Making sure at a glance that his daughters were uninjured, he turned toward their rescuers, saying,—

"Tell me, lads, who you are, that I may reward your brave deed;" and he shook hands with them both, warmly.

"We don't want any reward, sir," the boys answered simultaneously, and with blazing faces. "It wasn't anything to stop the horses. All we had to do was to talk to them a little, and pull on the reins."

"But you had to get near enough to talk to them and to take hold of the reins," the gentleman replied significantly. "At least tell me who you are."

Before the lads could answer, even had they been disposed to do so, some one in the crowd that now came surging up, shouted:—

"Hurrah for Rod! Hurrah for Todd!"

The cheers were given with a will, and anxious to avoid anything that seemed like an ovation, the lads picked up their wheels, and hurried away.

A half-dozen of the newcomers, however, volunteered the information the gentleman sought, and no less willingly tried to learn his own name. In a half-hour, therefore, the whole town knew and were busily discussing the two undeniable facts: Jeremiah Small, the congressman from that district, had visited Bayville; and two of the village lads had heroically

saved his daughters from a horrible death. While they are occupied in their self-imposed task we will take the time to look more closely into the history of the brave youths.

Upon the hill at the west of Bayville, overlooking both the town and the bay, and with spacious grounds about them, stand two large and beautiful residences, so exactly alike in every angle and feature that they are known as "the twin cottages." The more northern one is the property of Mr. John Todd, the president of the only manufacturing enterprise in the little village, — "The Bayville Cotton Mills," — while the other is owned by Mr. Walter B. Rodman, the superintendent of the same company.

The two gentlemen are not only closely associated in their business interests, but have a family relation, having married the twin daughters of Judge Richard Wheeler—in his day the most prominent man in the county, and one of the best known men of the country. He had been in both the state and national legislatures, and had held for years a place on the supreme bench, honoring every official station by his rare scholarship, his spotless integrity, and his broad statesmanship. On his death

his large property, including the homestead at Bayville, descended to his two daughters, Emily and Grace.

It was not long before the young ladies were beset with suitors, many doubtless attracted by the social position and wealth of the maidens. But soon they proved that they had not only inherited the property, but the good sense, of their honored father, and chose for their husbands two young men of their native town, already recognized as in every way worthy of them by their sterling characters and faithful industry. So on the same June day John Todd led Emily, and Walter Rodman led Grace, to the marriage altar.

The great, old-fashioned house, so long the home of the judge, was jointly occupied by the young couples until "the twin cottages" were erected near by, and then it was torn down, leaving its spacious grounds to be divided between the newer and more modern edifices.

Here in "the twin cottages," on the same day, July 4, 1870, and at almost precisely the same hour, two baby boys were born. For a time there was much discussion as to the proper names for the newcomers, but the matter ended in a way that might after all have

been expected. Mr. Todd called his boy Rodman Wheeler Todd, while Mr. Rodman named his son Todd Wheeler Rodman. These long and euphonious appellations, however, were soon shortened to Rod and Todd.

Side by side the lads grew, wholly unlike in personal appearance and dispositions, yet as inseparable and devoted as two brothers.

Rod was the taller of the two; he had light hair and ruddy countenance, and his laughing blue eyes and frank open ways won him friends instantly. Todd was stouter, dark-haired, more reserved in manner, slower to make acquaintance, and perhaps not quite so general a favorite as his cousin. But both lads were courageous and manly; as true as steel, not only to each other, but to all that they believed to be right; and, though only sons, were not spoiled by home petting or social surroundings.

In quickness of thought and brilliancy of intellect Rod had the advantage; but Todd's ingenuity and skill of execution made him a valuable helpmate to his quicker-witted chum; while, together, they made a pair mature and

capable beyond their years.

Though not yet sixteen years of age, their heroic deed in saving Congressman Small's daughters was so in keeping with the reputa-

tions they had already established, that the villagers, with the simple assertion, "after all it was just like Rod and Todd," soon dismissed the exciting incident from their memories.

But Mr. Small was not so forgetful. Having learned who the lads were he sought them out, publicly thanked them for their brave deed, and two weeks later sent them the *Rescue*, a fine sloop, the fastest twenty footer on the bay—a gift the boys hailed with exclamations of delight.

Whether the fact they had been born on the Fourth of July had anything to do with it or not, it is certain that their love of adventure was innate; and they were soon planning for the jolliest summer on the bay they had ever known. But their plans were tame beside the actual adventures they, through a curious mishap, were destined to experience in the next few months, not on sea, but amid the clouds and in far away and unknown regions of the earth.

CHAPTER II.

A CRY FOR HELP.

The signboards in Bayville were covered with huge posters. The shop windows were full of the same placards. They attracted the attention of old and young alike. Excited groups stood before them and looked them over. They announced that Oldport, an enterprising city fifteen miles up the coast, would celebrate its two hundredth anniversary on the coming fourth of July in a gorgeous and imposing manner.

The celebration was, in fact, to be a double one. The anniversary of the founding of the town really fell on the last day of June; but this was so near to the date of the Declaration of American Independence that the committee who had the matter in charge, with becoming patriotism, decided upon the later day for their exercises, aiming thus to recognize and honor the two historical events by one and the same public demonstration.

The programme for the day, as set forth on the placards, was an elaborate one. Evidently there had been a studied effort on the part of the managers to suit all tastes, and to gratify every historic and patriotic sentiment. For there were to be aeronauts and acrobats, battalions and bands, concerts and contests, dances and decorations, feasts and fireworks, guns and games, historians and humorists, poems and parades, readings and races, speeches and shows.

Among the first to read the showy posters were our young friends, Rod and Todd. While on their way down to the bay for an afternoon sail, the placards in an adjacent window attracted their attention, and they paused to look them over. As they continued their walk, Todd remarked,—

"We must go over to Oldport in the Rescue on the Fourth, Rod."

"Yes," assented his comrade; "and there is something else we must do. It is to enter our boat for a race. If you noticed, Class C takes in all sailboats twenty feet and under, and is open to all competitors. It meets our case exactly."

"So it does!" exclaimed Todd, enthusiastically; "and I remember the course. It is out around Black Rock Light-ship and return — a good twenty miles for the round trip. If there is a stiff breeze that day, we shall have a sail we aren't likely to forget in a long time."

They had now reached the dock opposite their sloop, and Rod looked the stanch boat over with a complacent smile as he replied:—

"It will make little difference to us what the weather is. The *Rescue* can stand any wind or sea we are likely to have off the light-ship this summer. Light breeze or strong, once let us enter that race, I believe the cup is ours."

"Of course it is," returned his chum. "But the race comes at two, and Professor Barton's balloon ascension at four. We can hardly get back to the city in time to see that, and I hate

to miss it."

"Oh! I expect you would like a chance to go up in it, Todd!" retorted Rod, with a goodnatured laugh. "You've always had a weakness in that direction, I recollect. But there is also an ascension at noon. You can see that, and let the later one go."

"Oh! the noon trip is of little account," Todd answered, somewhat contemptuously. "They only let the balloon go up a thousand feet, and don't loosen its fastenings. It is so that Madam Barton can jump out with a para-

chute. It's worth seeing, of course. But that afternoon ascension is the real thing; for the professor is going to cut the cable, and make a real voyage skyward. I wonder where he'll land?"

"Perhaps out on the ocean where we are," suggested Rod, jocosely. "Then we can pick him up, win his deepest gratitude, and go with him on his next trip as a reward for our bravery. How does that suit you, Todd?"

"First-rate!" responded the lad, with ready good nature. He was used to Rod's banter,

and enjoyed it.

"It overthrows all my objections," he continued. "We'll enter for the race, and trust to luck to give us the cup — and a chance to pick up Professor Barton."

The fastenings of the *Rescue* had already been thrown off and her sails raised, and now, catching the brisk breeze that swept off shore, she ran swiftly down the bay. In the best of humor the two lads, as they sailed on, talked over the arrangements necessary for entering their beautiful boat in the coming race, forgetting entirely the subject over which they a moment before had been jesting. Yet as "truth is often stranger than fiction," so "jest often proves to be a fact," and thus it was to prove

in their case, singular as that assertion may here seem.

It was not difficult for them to obtain the consent of their parents to enter the Rescue for the race. In fact Mr. Todd became so interested in the matter that he accompanied the boys to Oldport, and saw to it personally that every preliminary essential to a proper entry of the craft was complied with.

They made this trip in the little sloop, and as they were returning to Bayville, the gentleman looked long and earnestly off toward the light-ship in the dim distance, remarking at

length: -

"My advice to you, lads, is that you go over your assigned course a number of times before the race. It will at the least familiarize you with it, and even that may be worth something

to you when the contest takes place."

The boys were not slow to adopt this shrewd suggestion, and so it happened that they made the run about the light-ship under light and medium and heavy winds. Carefully watching their boat under all these conditions, they were sure they had learned many points in her working which would be of value to them whatever the breeze proved to be on the Fourth. Some of the other craft that had entered for the same

race were also out, wisely running over the course before the day of contest; and this enabled them to form some idea of the speed of their competitors. When, therefore, on the evening of the third, the lads anchored in Oldport harbor, it was to wait in quiet confidence for the morrow, which they firmly believed

would give them the victory.

The Fourth dawned fair and beautiful. At sunrise thirteen of the city bells rang together for precisely thirteen minutes in commemoration of the thirteen colonies that had united in the Declaration of American Independence; then a fourteenth bell joined the pealing chorus, and every two minutes thereafter an additional bell added its chimes, until one was ringing for every state in the Union. At six o'clock twenty guns were fired, one for each decade of the town's existence. At nine came the parades, the most interesting feature of which was that intended to mark "The Flight of Time." Two hundred groups, each dressed or equipped to suggest the year it represented, passed in rapid succession down the main avenues of the city. It was a living picture of the changes made during two centuries. At noon, from the spacious park near the centre of the city, the first balloon ascension took place. For a thousand feet the beautiful airship mounted gracefully heavenward, and there tugged away at its cable like a thing of life seeking to free itself from its fetters. Then from it there leaped lightly forth a lady, a huge parachute tightly grasped in her hands. In almost a breathless attitude the vast throng watched as she gently descended toward the earth; and when she finally touched the ground uninjured, a great cheer burst forth from a thousand throats.

A moment later two lads left the crowd, and hastened down the street toward the harbor. As they walked along one asked of the other:

"What did you think of the spectacle,

Todd?"

"I like the balloon well enough," the boy answered calmly. "I believe it has a scientific use, and will yet have a practical one. But I don't think much of leaping out of a balloon with a parachute just for show. There is of course a time to use the latter, but it is as you would use a life-buoy — when there is no other chance of escape."

"I agree with you," Rod said heartily. "That whole spectacle seemed to me foolhardy and uncalled for. I'm glad it is over."

They soon reached their boat, which had been left in charge of an old, one-legged sailor,

who was glad of this opportunity to earn an honest penny. He greeted the lads pleasantly:—

"Here ye are, lads; and ye'll find yer purty craft in as good shape as ye left her. But I'm sorry for ye! There ain't goin' to be wind enough this afternoon to shake out yer sails. The race will be just a drift round the light-ship."

"It certainly looks that way, Tom," Rod replied, as he slipped a bright silver dollar into the sailor's hand. "But the Rescue can drift

as fast as the other boats, I'm thinking."

"Thank ye, sir," the lame man said, touching his hat as he received the coin; but when Todd, following his comrade's example, duplicated the gift, he edged toward the boys, say-

ing in low tones: -

"The rules 'low ye to turn the light-ship from either side, so just shape yer course to the north end of Black Rock reef and round it from that quarter. It's the longest route, but ye'll cover it quicker, for there's a current to help ye on. While if ye round from the south end ye'll work against the current half the way back. Few know this, an' nearly every boat will go the wrong way. Mark old Tom Sparrow's words;" and in another minute he was hobbling away up the dock.

The lads looked at each other an instant, and then Rod remarked:—

"It will be fair for us to use this information. We have a right to take every advantage of the wind and tide that we know of."

"Of course we have," Todd assented; "and it makes no difference how we learn of it. But after all, Tom's information merely explains what we had already noted: that for some reason we always made a faster proportionate time whenever we sailed the north route. We'll follow that course—and win even though the breeze is light."

An hour and a half later, at the report of a pistol, the *Rescue*, as one of a dozen boats entered for the race, crossed the starting line, and with scarcely wind enough to straighten out her sails, as the old sailor had predicted, proceeded down the harbor. For a time the tiny craft seemed like great gulls on the surface of the water idly floating with the tide. When out beyond the reach of the land, however, the breeze stiffened perceptibly, and the sloop slowly forged ahead of her competitors.

"We hardly need take advantage of the north route," Todd said to his comrade in low tones, as he noticed the steady gain of their boat. "I'm not so sure of that, —look!" Rod exclaimed, slightly bending his head to the left.

Todd glanced in the direction indicated, and saw that one of the contesting boats was evidently shaping her course to round Black Rock reef from the north side.

"It's the Golden Plume, and Captain Luther of Oldport is sailing her!" ejaculated the boy. "He's an old timer here, and you can't fool him on either wind or current. Let us make the north turn also."

"I shall," responded Rod, who had the tiller; "but will not do so until we reach those dark waters a half-mile ahead. If I mistake not, that marks the beginning of the current Tom mentioned."

There was no perceptible change in the relation of the two boats for the next ten minutes. The *Rescue* led by about her own length, and entered the black-hued streak with that number of feet in her favor. But five minutes later it was evident she was slowly running away from her follower. She drew several inches more water than the *Golden Plume*, and, slight as the difference was, now that they had struck the undertow, it was telling in her favor.

Not another of the contesting craft took the course of the head sloops, and from an occa-

sional sentence that floated across the waters to their ears, it was evident to Rod and Todd that the occupants of the rear boats were making merry over what seemed to them to be a huge blunder on the part of their leaders.

"Let them laugh!" Todd said, as some of their chaffing reached him. "'He laughs loudest who laughs last.' We have now practically narrowed the race down to a single boat, and to my mind not the fastest one among our competitors."

"You may be right," answered his comrade. "But we'll take no chances. Loosen the jib a little. We'll catch every ounce of the wind we can;" and as he spoke he let the boom of

the sail run out a little.

Slight as these changes were they were soon felt by the *Rescue*, and she sped away from her follower at a rate that was remarkable when the lightness of the wind is considered. In an hour and forty minutes she had rounded the lightship and was on the homeward stretch. The *Golden Plume* was now fully a quarter of a mile behind her, while the boats that had taken the south route were with a single exception still west of the reef.

"The race is ours unless we have some mishap," Rod now said, breaking a long interval of silence; "but I confess it is hardly worth the gaining. We shall barely cross the starting line within the four hours necessary to claim the race."

"It is no worse for us than for the other fellows," Todd remarked philosophically. "But if the *Rescue* can run away from the other boats in this wind, what would she have done in a regular gale?"

"I can tell you what I should have liked to

have done," Rod replied sententiously.

"What?"

"Had breeze enough to run the entire twenty miles in two hours, and come over the starting line with jib down, mainsail reefed, and both of us clutching the tiller for dear life."

"It would have been exciting to say the least," his comrade answered dryly. "Evidently this light wind is making you desperate, Rod."

There was no answer, and silence reigned again for some minutes. Then Todd suddenly exclaimed:—

"There goes Professor Barton! I had no idea we could see the ascension so plainly from off here. It is almost as good as being at the park."

For some time the lads watched the balloon

as it ascended. Apparently there was little wind over the city, for the airship went straight up, and was soon a mere speck in the sky. Then some upper current of air caught it and wafted it slowly off toward the northwest, and long before the sloop reached the harbor it was entirely out of sight.

Each moment the land breeze grew lighter, and it was half-past five before the Rescue reached the return stake boat. The Golden Plume came in fifteen minutes later, and a third boat reached the line just in time to be

counted in the race.

But in that half-hour of waiting there had been a remarkable change in the weather. Dark clouds were rolling up from the west; short, sharp puffs of wind came at irregular intervals; the sultry air had grown cooler, and low mutterings of distant thunder were heard. The lads were not unmindful of these signs of a coming storm, and now ran alongside of the judges' boat.

"We hardly think our run has been worth calling a race," Rod announced; "and we are perfectly willing to count it off if you think

best."

"It is generous in you," replied one of the referees; "but as three of the competing boats

finished inside of the four hours, we think the race will stand. Anyway, you will know to-morrow."

"Well, then send us word at Bayville. We promised to return home to-night, and we will try to make the trip before the storm breaks."

"Better stay in the harbor," called out an old sailor from an adjacent boat. "In a half hour it will be blowing a gale."

His words were unheeded if not unheard, for the *Rescue* had already begun her homeward voyage.

Once outside of the harbor she was headed down the coast, and under a constantly increasing wind tore through the water at a rapid rate.

Blacker grew the clouds, the darkness deepened, the gusts of wind became more frequent and stronger. Soon it seemed wiser to the lads to take in their jib; ten minutes later they had reefed their sail and were battling in the clutches of an awful storm.

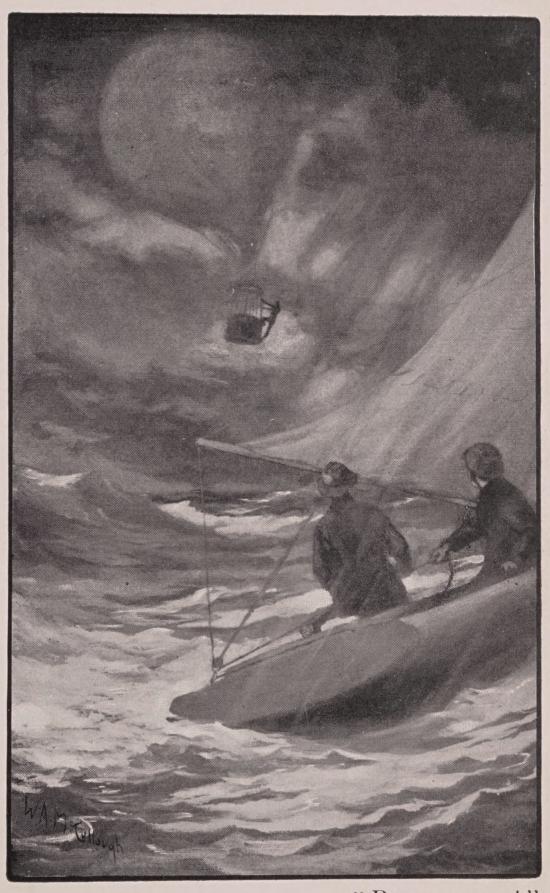
Rain, hail, thunder, lightning, wind, and waves all seemed to be struggling for the mastery, while the boat was but a cockle-shell in the midst of the fighting elements.

Drenched to the skin, putting forth their united efforts to keep the sloop to her course, the lads took no notice of what was happening about them, until a voice that seemed to come from the clouds themselves called out:—

"Pick me up, youngsters! I'm going to drop into the sea."

They glanced upward in time to see Professor Barton's balloon sweeping by, not over two hundred feet above their heads. In an instant it was a thousand feet beyond them, but still they had a glimpse of a man leaping from the swaying car, and going down as straight as an arrow into the angry waters.

The next moment, though it placed them at the mercy of the storm, and carried them directly out to sea, the two brave lads had turned their boat and were running for the place where the professor had disappeared beneath the tossing waves.



"PICK ME UP!"



CHAPTER III.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

As the sloop changed her course, the huge billows swept over her bow, threatening for the moment to sink her with their weight. Then rising like a duck on the crest of the next wave, she shook off her watery burden and dashed on before the wind at a terrific speed.

By tacit consent Rod now became the commander of the craft, and promptly issued his

orders to his willing comrade: -

"Drop the sail, Todd! We shall go fast enough under a bare pole. Then take a rope and go forward. Let me know when you catch sight of the professor. I'll bring the boat as near him as possible, and you can throw him the line."

A minute had not elapsed before these commands were obeyed, and Todd stood on the bow of the yacht, his left hand grasping the forestay, his right hand holding a coil of rope, his keen eyes glancing sharply over the water toward the spot where they had last seen the unfortunate aeronaut.

An overruling providence must have guided the brave boys unerringly. In an instant, so rapid was their pace, the watching lad cried:—

"I see him, Rod! He's a little to the left! Port the helm a trifle! There! We are now running for him. Keep your present course if possible."

The words must have been borne by the wind to the ears of the swimmer, for he imme-

diately shouted, though faintly: -

"Here I am! Quick! I cannot hold out much longer!"

"Ay! ay! sir. Here you are! Catch the

rope!"

The sloop was almost abreast of the struggling man, but perhaps twelve or fifteen feet below him, as Todd spoke. It was as near to him as they had been able to bring the driving craft, and in a moment they would be beyond him, with little hope of returning in the face of the storm to his rescue. On the accuracy of that single throw of the line, therefore, hung the professor's fate.

The lad realized this, as he leaned forward to toss the coil toward the aeronaut. He knew if the rope fell to the east of or beyond the swimmer, there would be no possibility of his seizing it; if, however, it dropped to the west, wind and wave would unite to carry it into his grasp. This knowledge governed his throw; a keen eye and steady arm made it a success. The line left his hand to strike a yard or two west of the man, and sweeping down and around him in a flash was as quickly caught and secured about his waist.

Meantime Todd was not inactive. As the coil sped out over the water, he saw that he had made a successful throw, and running down the tiny deck with the end of the rope he still held in his hand, he hastily fastened it to the foot of the mast.

He was just in time. The boat sped on under the tremendous power of the storm, the line soon ran out its full length, the weight of the professor came full upon it; for a moment the cord sung and snapped, and the mast creaked under the strain, then the sloop with scarcely lessened speed went on, drawing the man in its wake.

In anticipation of this result, Rod had lashed his tiller and was ready to seize the rope as it swung astern. His chum came to his help, and under their united strength the aeronaut was soon drawn up to the boat. His eyes were closed, his face was pallid, his form as limp and helpless as though he were dead.

"We must lift him in!" Rod now said, clutching the collar of the unconscious man. "Quick!

grab him under the armpits!"

His comrade did so before the words were fairly spoken, and together they raised him partly out of the water. There Todd held him until Rod could change his hold to the professor's waist; then, waiting a moment until the stern of the craft sank low into the sea, they drew him slowly on board.

As he dropped into the cockpit, both lads knelt beside him, one to listen for his breath-

ing, the other to feel of his heart.

"He is alive!" they exclaimed simultaneously and joyfully; then they set themselves to the task

of restoring him to consciousness.

Rod chafed the pallid temples and rubbed the cold wrists, while Todd brought from the little cabin a glass of water, the only restorative they had on the vessel. A few drops of the liquid, put between the teeth, were at length swallowed, and soon the closed eyes opened and looked at them. The man seemed to realize immediately that he was saved, for a faint smile quivered on his white lips as he feebly said:—

"It was a close shave, lads. I have had but a

few closer ones in my life. You've pulled me right out of the jaws of death, and I shall not forget it. But lift me up a little, and I'll soon get my breath. It was knocked clear out of me."

They complied with his request, and he gained his strength with a rapidity which astonished them and proved that his unconscious condition had been due to exhaustion and not to injury. It was not long, therefore, before he was able to inquire who they were, and to tell his own story. He began the conversation by asking,—

"What boat is this?"

"The Rescue," answered both boys together.

"I thought so, and you are Rodman Todd and Todd Rodman from Bayville. The Rescue was a gift to you for a rescue, and now you have used the Rescue for rescue. Very appropriate, certainly," continued the aeronaut humorously, notwithstanding his weakness.

"How did you know?" both his hearers asked, with a confusion the fast-falling darkness

could not wholly hide.

"Congressman Small is an old friend of mine, and I heard from his own lips of your brave act in rescuing his little daughters," he explained. "I knew, too, that you had entered your boat

for the race at Oldport this afternoon. Did you win?"

"Yes, sir," Rod responded; "but under the light wind it was little more than a drifting around the stake-boats, so we went to the judges and offered to count the race off."

"I suppose, then, you were on your way home when the storm caught you?" the saved man now questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I ran in with the gale twenty or thirty miles inland, where I had drifted after my ascension. I saw it coming, and endeavored to let out the gas and make a landing before it was upon me. But for some reason the valve caught when half open, and the hydrogen escaped so slowly I was still a thousand feet above the earth when I found myself in the clutches of the tempest, sweeping toward the sea. The balloon was still sinking, and when I reached the ocean I was not over two hundred feet above its surface. For a few minutes I thought every chance of saving myself had departed, then I caught sight of your boat, and hailing you, jumped into the billows. Many would have unheeded my cry, thinking only of their own safety; and when I saw you were coming down after me, I felt sure I knew you

and your boat. The act was in keeping with the reputation you lads have already made for yourselves. Surely a kind providence must have been watching over me, to lead where you could save me. I am grateful to that providence and to you;" and there were tears in the speaker's eyes.

"We are very glad we succeeded in rescuing you, sir," Rod remarked when the professor had finished; "but we shall have to run before the storm until it breaks, and shall probably be

carried many miles to sea."

"Yes," assented the aeronaut, "I expected that; but your boat is new and stanch, and we can work back to the land when the gale has expended its force. I could not have done that with the balloon, even had I kept it out of the water, so I preferred to take my chances here."

"Oh! I anticipate nothing worse than some hours of hunger and thirst," Rod admitted. "We have no food, and but little water on board," he added by way of explanation. "We took our meals at the hotel while in Oldport, expected to run home in a couple of hours, and so made no provision for such a trip as this is likely to be."

"I am sorry to have brought you into so un-

pleasant a situation," the professor remarked apologetically. "Really, I did not think of that

when I hailed you."

Rod laughed lightly. "Just as though we were blaming you," he hastened to say. "Why, sir, I am very sure we should soon have been obliged to have done what we are now doing—run away before the storm—even if it had not been to pick you up. I was only regretting that we were not better provided for such a trip on your account. You ought to have good nourishing food to restore your strength and relieve your exhaustion. As for Todd and myself, we can stand both hunger and exposure a good many hours, as you shall see."

"Don't worry on my account," Mr. Barton returned cheerfully. "This exposure and deprivation seem but a trifle beside what I have experienced in the deserts of Africa and in the cold regions of the North." And straightway, perhaps to turn the thoughts of his young companions from themselves and surroundings, he began to tell them of the adventures he had

met with in far-away regions of the earth.

As they listened they learned that the rescued man was an aeronaut for purely scientific reasons. Possessed of an abundant fortune, he had devoted his time and talents and means to

the solution of the intensely interesting problem of aerial navigation, to the study of the upper currents of the air, and to the collection of any aerostatical facts and data that could be of interest or value to the scientific world.

In following his chosen pursuit he had visited nearly every country of the globe, had made ascensions in all climates, and had proved the utility of the balloon in military and naval engagements and in scientific explorations.

The balloon he had just lost was of his own make, while the parachute which his wife had so successfully used that afternoon was of his own invention. His public exhibitions were not given for the love of gain, for his charges barely paid the expenses that were involved, but in the interest of science, and to put to the practical test the inventions and improvements he was constantly making in his aeronautical apparatus.

In the course of his experiments there had been many thrilling adventures, and some of these he now told the lads as they sped on through the darkness and storm out upon the wide bosom of the ocean. His recital had two effects, both doubtless designed by him: they helped to pass away the long, weary hours; and they nerved his hearers to meet their pres-

ent misfortune with heroism and courage, to believe there could be but one issue from that night's peril—a safe and sure deliverance.

Their faith had a speedy reward. As the morning dawned the storm broke, the clouds dispersed, the wind died away, the sun came out. There was a promise of a beautiful day, and it meant warmth for their chilly bodies, heat to dry their wet clothing, the certainty of a safe return to the distant shore.

How far they were from land it was impossible to tell, but it could not be less than a hundred miles. Under the diminished wind and against the still boisterous sea, this would mean a run of twelve or fourteen hours. It was a long time to go without food of any kind, but thankful that they had escaped the storm with their lives, the occupants of the little sloop turned her bow to the west, hoisted her sail and jib, and started homeward.

None of the trio had been able to obtain any sleep during the night, and Rod now urged his companions to enter the tiny cabin and take a much-needed rest.

"I will call Todd in two hours," he promised, "and he can awaken you two hours later, professor. In that way we will all make up our lost sleep." His comrades demurred at first, each offering to take the first two hours at the tiller; but Rod refused, clinching his refusal each time with the playful remark,—

"I'm captain here, and it is the crew's business to obey orders;" so they finally yielded, and entering the cabin were soon sound asleep.

When their loud breathing announced this fact, Rod did a strange thing. He turned the sloop about and ran straight out into the ocean. Away off in the east was a small dark spot, and toward this the yacht was headed. To the gazing lad it could mean but one thing—an ocean steamer was approaching.

In fifteen minutes he could see her clearly, in a half hour he was alongside of her, and a moment later, together with his astonished but delighted comrades, he was assisted to her deck. She proved to be a Cunarder, bound for Boston, and her kind-hearted captain spared no pains to make his unexpected passengers comfortable.

Before noon they were in the city, and had wired to their friends the glad news of their safety. Professor Barton decided to leave the boys here, but arranged at his own expense for the sloop to be abundantly provisioned for her voyage to Bayville.

"I hope to see you again soon, my lads," he said in parting; "and remember, you have a life friend in Horace L. Barton."

Leaving the city at an early hour the following morning, the Rescue made a remarkably fast trip up the coast, arriving at Bayville before sunset. As the lads went up the main avenue they heard the newsboys calling out: -

"Here's the Oldport News! All about how

Rod and Todd saved Professor Barton!"

Wondering what it could mean, they bought a paper and glanced it hurriedly over. On the first page, set off with great headlines, was an account of their adventure, so accurately told there could be but one explanation of the astounding fact: Professor Barton himself must have given the story to the Associated Press.

Their coming up the bay had been detected an hour before by anxious eyes, aided by a powerful opera glass, and their mothers were at the lawn gate to welcome them. No sooner were the warm and loving greetings over than

the ladies exclaimed: -

"We have heard all about your rescue of Professor Barton! What won't you lads do next!"

"Nothing to disgrace you, we hope," the boys laughingly rejoined, and so dismissed the matter. Yet the saving of the distinguished aeronaut was a second link in the chain of their experiences which was to be crowned with an adventure which should fill those proud mothers' hearts with long months of anxious suspense, and eventually astonish the scientific and archæological world.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED MISHAP.

The third and final link in the chain of circumstances that led to the remarkable series of adventures which our young friends Rod and Todd were destined to experience, came about in a perfectly natural way.

One morning in the following October Mr. Todd, while eating breakfast, remarked to his

wife: -

"I shall make my usual trip South next week, Emily."

"I have expected some such announcement," she answered with a smile, "and I presume it also means that Rod and Todd are to get ready to go with you," she continued, glancing at her son, who had already dropped his knife and fork, and was looking eagerly toward his father.

"Yes," Mr. Todd assented, to Rod's intense satisfaction. "I promised them a year ago that they should go with me this fall, and there is no reason why I should break my word."

"You will sail on the Knickerbocker with your old friend Captain Post, I suppose," Mrs. Todd now said, more to continue the conversation than from any doubt on the subject. These business trips of her husband to New Orleans were of annual occurrence, and he always sailed on the steamer Knickerbocker, whose captain had been one of his boyhood playmates.

"Of course," her husband responded. "We shall leave here next Wednesday, as I have considerable business in New York, and on the following Saturday sail with the steamer. But now the time of our departure is so near at hand, I am somewhat concerned about you, Emily. Rod and I have never left you at the same time before, and you will be lonely, I fear.

What will you do?"

"Oh! Grace and I have planned for the trying emergency," she replied with a light laugh. "My cook and housemaid are glad to take a short rest, so I shall close the house and go over to the other cottage until you return."

"An excellent arrangement!" Mr. Todd exclaimed in hearty approval. Then he said to

the lad: —

"You can tell Todd as soon as you please of my arrangements, Rod, and be ready, both of you, to take the noon express on Wednesday." "All right, sir," the boy responded gleefully; and when his breakfast was eaten he ran over to his cousin's to acquaint him with the good news, and both lads were soon discussing the journey they had looked forward to for twelve months with bright anticipations.

As it was now only Saturday, there was ample time to pack their valises and complete all other necessary arrangements for the trip; and when on the appointed day they stood on the rear platform of the rapidly moving train, waving their farewells to their mothers, who had come down to the station to see them off, it is doubtful if there were two happier boys in all New England. No premonition came to them that it would be long months before any of their little party would again look upon the familiar scenes of Bayville.

Once in New York, Mr. Todd's business engagements took all of his time up to the hour of the steamer's sailing. But Rod and Todd had been in the city frequently, and were fully competent to look out for themselves until the noon hour Saturday. In the parks and museums of the metropolis they found enough to amuse and instruct them until the *Knicker-bocker* steamed slowly out from her dock. The day was raw and cold, heavy clouds overcast the

sky, a strong wind was blowing in from the sea; a storm evidently was impending, and the lads were compelled to button their overcoats tight about them and turn up their collars about their necks to keep warm. Captain Post, who was standing near them talking with Mr. Todd, saw their efforts to withstand the chilly air, and said:—

"Never mind, lads! This cold will, for us at least, be of short duration. In twenty-four hours we shall be in a warmer latitude, and before we reach the south coast of Florida you will be in your summer clothing."

To the lads, going South for the first time, this hardly seemed possible, but they found the skipper was right. The next morning when they went on deck there was a bright sun and a soft southerly breeze, while all day the temperature grew steadily warmer, and at night they stood abaft the cabin without overcoats on, watching the placid sea. Two days later they were in white duck suits and broad-brim straw hats, and were even then eager to seek the shady side of the vessel to escape the fierce heat. And when they entered the mouth of the Mississippi and ploughed their way up its turbid current to the Crescent City, it seemed as though in some way the year had rolled

back two months of its calendar, and they were in the heat of a northern August.

It was late in the afternoon when they left the steamer for their hotel on St. Charles Avenue, and no attempt was made by them that day to take in the interesting sights of the great semi-tropical city. But the next morning Mr. Todd said:—

"After breakfast, lads, I will go with you to the French Market, Jackson Square, and Picayune Tier, so that you can see some of the older portions of the city, teeming with business and commercial activity. At nine o'clock, however, I shall have to leave you to look out for yourselves until the noon hour, when I will meet you here at the hotel. After our siesta we will take a ride through the avenues and suburbs of the town, and get a look at its beautiful parks and residences—its social and fashionable life."

The plan was agreeable to the boys, and for nearly two hours they followed their conductor through the old or French portion of the city, finding at every step something to interest or amuse them. When left to themselves, they sauntered slowly off up a street leading to the north, and in a surprisingly brief time found themselves out of the business part of the town and amid what seemed to be an

entirely different city—a city of villas and cottages, of umbrageous gardens, decked with fruits and flowers.

"My! isn't this fine, Todd! I wonder if there is much of it?" Rod exclaimed enthusiastically, as they gazed upon the beautiful surroundings.

A gentleman who was passing heard the remark, and stopped. Raising his hat, he said courteously:—

"You are strangers here, young gentlemen, and from the North?"

"Yes, sir," the lads replied unhesitatingly.

"I am glad you have an opportunity to see our beautiful city," he went on no less affably; "and when I tell you that we have over four hundred miles of these forest-shaded streets, covering an area of one hundred and fifty-five square miles, you will obtain some idea of our city's size. No other city in the land devotes such ample space to its homes, and, once outside of our business quarter, all the rest of the town is like a vast suburb."

He then suggested to them several drives of rare beauty, some notable institutions of the city it was worth their while to visit, and handing a card to Rod, who stood nearest to him, added,—

"If I can serve you in any way, command me;" then he hurried away.

Rod stared first at the card and then at the departing man, exclaiming at length,—

"Bless you, Todd, that was the mayor!"

"He practically has given us the freedom of the city, hasn't he?" Todd rejoined with a laugh, and glancing at the bit of pasteboard. "Well, that is surprise number one, I wonder what our second will be?"

He found out in less than two hours. Returning to the hotel before the time Mr. Todd had appointed for his coming, the lads went into the reading room. At one of the tables a gentleman sat writing, and glanced curiously up at the newcomers. The next moment he had dropped his pen, and was hastening toward them, exclaiming:—

"Rod and Todd, if I'm alive! How came you here, boys? I'm delighted to see you!"

It was Professor Barton, the aeronaut.

It took the lads but a moment to explain their own arrival in the city, and then the professor said:—

"I'm down here professionally, as perhaps you already surmise. To-morrow, October 25, the State Agricultural Fair opens, and the managers have engaged me to make an ascen-

sion each day during the exhibit. I might rather say a series of ascensions each day, as the balloon is to be confined, and an opportunity given to the visitors to ascend a thousand feet, and so obtain a bird's eye view of the city and its surroundings. It's a free trip, and the directors think it is going to be a drawing card, but,"—and he now lowered his voice—"I don't think so. My opinion is, that very few will have the courage to make what is really a perfectly safe and delightful voyage. But we shall see! We shall see!"

Mr. Todd joined the group at this moment, and was introduced to the aeronaut.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir," Mr. Barton said heartily. "How singularly things happen! Yesterday I took dinner here, and not a person I saw at the table did I know. To-day I have the pleasure of eating with three friends — two of whom I owe a debt of gratitude I never expect to be able to pay. Mr. Todd, you should be proud of such a son and such a nephew!"

Mr. Todd looked at the lads affectionately,

saying, however, simply, -

"I believe, sir, they have in them the metal out of which men are made."

Two months later he was prepared to change

the first two words of his declaration to "I know."

After dining together Mr. Todd invited the professor to join him and the boys on the drive they had planned for the afternoon—an invitation he gladly accepted. In the course of the ride they came around by the extensive fair grounds. Above the high fence which shut them in, the balloon could be seen tugging at its fastenings, and as the aeronaut's eye rested upon it, he said:—

"If you will drive into the grounds, Mr. Todd, I will show you my pet—an entirely new airship, with features I have never used before. You can see it better to-day than you can with the crowd surging around it. That side gate to your right is open, and I have a

pass that will allow us to enter."

Mr. Todd gave the driver the necessary order, and a few minutes later the party alighted near the balloon and walked over to it. A small space had been surrounded by a rope fence, and inside of this was the airship, already filled for its ascension. Guy ropes held it down, while a huge cable, wound about a big drum, was arranged to be payed out when the moment for its flight had come. The car hung close to the ground, and helping his compan-

ions into it, Mr. Barton was soon busily engaged in explaining to them the merits of his last invention over any prior one. Enthusiast as he was, an hour went by before he had finished his explanations; and ere he was done, his little audience had caught something of his own admiration for the graceful balloon, whose buoyancy made it seem like a thing of life.

"Oh, father, we must make an ascension with the professor!" Rod exclaimed, as they were on their way back to the waiting carriage; while Todd, with flushed cheeks and

suppressed excitement, added, -

"Do say yes, Uncle John!"

Before Mr. Todd could make any reply,

Professor Barton spoke.

"I have a proposition to make, sir, which I trust you may be able to accept. I have been your guest this afternoon, will you and the lads be my guests to-morrow at my first ascension? It is to take place at twelve, and I will arrange for you to lunch with me a thousand feet in the air, with a most delightful panorama before you, the cool breezes playing about you, and the purest of ozones to sharpen your appetite. It will be so unique a feature the managers of the fair will readily consent to this change in their programme."

Mr. Todd had but to glance at the boys to discover their eagerness to accept of this unexpected invitation, and not unwilling to try the novel experience himself, replied,—

"Very well, professor, consider us your

guests at that hour."

The next morning handbills were scattered over the city and through the fair grounds, announcing that at noon the distinguished aeronaut, Professor Barton, accompanied by a small party of invited guests, would ascend in the new and beautiful airship *Halcyon*, and lunch in mid-air.

Fully ten thousand people, therefore, were gathered about the rope-fenced circle, when the professor and his guests entered it and mounted into the balloon car. A tiny table at the centre, spread with the whitest of linen, and several large hampers under the special charge of a young negro, wearing a waiter's garb, told of the coming feast.

Mr. Todd, the two lads, and the aeronaut quickly took their assigned places, the guy ropes were cast off, the great drum, turned by two men, began to unwind, and slowly the graceful airship ascended.

The first sensation of the occupants was that of the gazing throng suddenly dropping away

from them; then came the second, no less surprising, - that of a suddenly widened horizon. To the north, Lake Pontchartrain came quickly into view; the great Father of Rivers became a gigantic snake of a silver hue, coiling about the city; while away off to the south was the Gulf of Mexico, looking from that elevation like a sea of polished glass.

A third surprising feature to the professor's guests was the steadiness of the car as they made their long mount; they had expected a swaying motion not unlike that of a vessel tossing on the waves of the ocean, but found instead, that the car was as motionless as it would be when sitting on the smoothest ground. Upon reaching the full length of their cable, therefore, there was nothing to prevent the setting of the table and the serving of the food as easily as in the dining room of their hotel.

The lunch was soon in progress, and for an hour the little party ate, and discussed the surrounding scenery, unmindful of the great throng below them. Then a faint sound of many voices reached their ears, and the professor, who was near the edge of the car, glanced over. The

next moment he exclaimed: -

"There is a runaway in the fair grounds. Four mules, drawing a heavy drag, are rushing down upon the crowd of spectators. I fear many will be injured."

Leaving the table, every occupant of the tiny car now leaned over its sides, watching with absorbing interest the mishap down below.

On toward the throng the mules dashed, but before they fairly reached it, a great laneway had been made through it, so quickly did the

people separate, and no one was injured.

"I'm thankful for that!" the professor cried exultingly, giving no thought to how the accident might affect him or his comrades. In fact, there was hardly time for such a thought. For the next instant the frightened animals, dragging the huge vehicle after them, plunged against the rope fence that enclosed the circular space which held the cable drum. parted like a piece of tow, and in another second the runaways struck the drum itself, crushing it to atoms.

The same moment the balloon sprang upward, as though shot from a cannon's mouth, a thousand feet of rope dangling from its car. The runaway below had caused an aerial runaway, for the light airship, caught by an upper current from the north, now swept rapidly down toward the great gulf.

CHAPTER V.

AN AIRY PASSAGE.

So quickly did the released balloon fly upward, it had reached the upper current of air and was rushing seaward before its occupants, with a single exception, realized what had happened. That exception was Professor Barton himself. Accustomed to emergencies, and trained to act promptly therein, he seized a small cord near him, and, pulling it sharply, opened wide the escape valve in the top of the great gas sack, before his astonished companions said a word. But their ejaculations, which now followed one another in rapid succession, revealed how each regarded the mishap which had set the airship free and sent it off upon its runaway course.

Todd was the first to speak. Clapping his

hands impulsively, he cried, -

"Now we shall have a real balloon voyage!"
Rod glanging back at the city they were fast

Rod, glancing back at the city they were fast leaving, and forward at the great gulf toward which they were rapidly hastening, remarked with surprising forethought, -

"It may prove a longer voyage than you have bargained for, Todd."

While Mr. Todd exclaimed uneasily: -

"This is very unfortunate, professor; very unfortunate! Can't you hurry and let us down?"

Then the negro had his say. The moment the balloon bounded away from its fastenings he had caught hold of the side of the car with both hands. Holding on for dear life, his eyes rolling wildly in their sockets, his dark face almost ashen in its hue from amazement and terror, he now managed to gasp out:-

"Golly, Massa! When am dis hyer ting

gwine to lite?"

The laugh that immediately followed this exclamation fortunately relieved the amateur aeronauts from every feeling of uneasiness that the unexpected predicament in which they found themselves had momentarily awakened; and, as though moved by a mutual agreement, they looked toward the professor for any suggestion or explanation he cared to make.

" I have done all I can for the present to hasten our descent, sir," he promptly said, and addressing Mr. Todd; "the gas is already escaping, and though we are still ascending, it is at a constantly decreasing speed. In a few minutes we shall begin to drop slowly, and I hope to make

a safe landing before we reach the gulf."

There was surely nothing in the aeronaut's words or tones to alarm his hearers. He had explained the situation perfectly, and yet Rod could not help thinking of his last sentence, "I hope to make a safe landing before we reach the gulf." What if they were not able to do so? Then they would be carried out to sea. It was the fear of this which had led him to say to Todd, "It may prove a longer voyage than you have bargained for."

He glanced behind him. Their course was due south — as straight as a bird could fly. Already they had left the city, crossed the great, winding river, and were moving with startling rapidity toward the great indentation which the Gulf of Mexico makes into the southern shore of Louisiana just west of the delta of the Mississippi, and which is known as Barataria Bay. Putting his thoughts, therefore, into

words, the lad now asked, -

"How far is it to the gulf, in a direct line, professor?"

"Twenty or twenty-five miles," was the

answer.

"How fast are we going?"

The aeronaut smiled. He divined the boy's purpose in asking these questions, but replied quietly:—

"Not far from thirty miles an hour in this current, I should judge. It is a strong one."

"We shall be at the gulf in less than an hour then?"

"In about a half hour now, if we keep in this current — we have gone at least ten miles."

"How fast are we falling?"

The professor glanced at an instrument by which he stood — had, in fact, been standing for some minutes.

"We have dropped a thousand feet from our highest altitude," he explained. "We should sink faster if I had a larger party in the car, or heavier ballast. But like yourselves, I did not expect this voyage, and had made no preparations for it. Our rate of descent will steadily increase, however, as the gas escapes, and we shall go down at least two thousand feet more before we reach the bay."

"Will that enable us to make a landing?" It was Mr. Todd who asked this question.

"I will be perfectly frank with you, sir," Professor Barton responded. "It will not. We ascended to a height of four thousand two hundred feet. We have, as I have said, already

dropped one thousand feet, and are likely to descend two thousand more between here and the gulf, but that will leave us still twelve hundred feet in the air.

"Of course this is only an estimation, and has in it two elements of great uncertainty—we may descend faster than I count on, and the nearer we get to the earth's surface the slower we go. You will remember that at a thousand feet there was scarcely a breeze stirring. So my calculations may be all wrong, and we may make our landing all right, though close to the seashore. We can only wait and see."

Rod, who had been looking over the side of the basket while the professor was talking with

his father, now spoke again: -

"If we don't reach the ground with the car, Professor Barton, we may come near enough for our cable to drag along it. Wouldn't it be a good plan to pull it up and splice that anchor which I see over there by you on the end of it?"

Mr. Barton laughed heartily.

"You have the making of a first-class aeronaut in you, Rod," he then said. "We certainly shall do that very thing as a last resort. But I have not drawn in the rope for two reasons.

The weight of it dragging below us hastens our descent greatly; then, as you may have noticed, a part of the drum is still attached to the lower end of it. It looks like a mere splinter from this distance, but is really quite a bit of timber. It is, therefore, as good, if not better, than the anchor to drag through a forest or a big tree-top, and would be more likely to catch against the limbs and hold us. Should we reach the bay, however, I shall change the stick for the anchor, and try to lay hold of the sea bottom. We have several chances yet, you see, for a successful landing."

He spoke so unconcernedly, and seemed so sure there was some way out of their awkward predicament, that his companions were soon making the most of their unexpected trip.

By villages, across streams, over forests they flew, slowly drawing nearer the objects above which they floated, and rapidly approaching the great gulf which was so soon to decide their fate.

At length they were within a few miles of the shore, and nothing but low marshy fields lay between them and the water. The end of the cable, moreover, did not reach within two or three hundred feet of the ground.

"We must try the anchor!" the aeronaut

now exclaimed; and reaching out with a shorthandled boat-hook, he dexterously caught the big cable and began to pull it in. The two lads went to his help, and before the bay was reached the anchor had been bent to the rope and thrown overboard.

At first it dangled in the air a hundred feet above the water; then, as the balloon slowly settled, it skimmed lightly along the surface; finally it plunged entirely beneath the waves.

Anxiously the occupants of the car watched their experiment; on the catching of the anchor against the rough sea bottom or in the soft sea mud, now hung their one chance of not being carried out to sea.

One mile, two miles, three miles, they swept on, dragging the anchor through the watery depths; and then, as they approached a low, sandy islet, the iron with a sudden jerk held fast.

"Hurrah!" the boys shouted, swinging their hats above their heads.

Mr. Todd, no less excited, pointed off toward the barren island, saying:—

"We can land there, professor, and then find some way to reach the shore!"

"See! the light breeze is carrying us directly toward the cay, and we can drop right upon it,

if our rope is long enough," the aeronaut said in confident tones. "At the worst, we shall have only a shallow ducking, and I will not lose the balloon."

It certainly seemed as though their landing was now assured, and so it would have been, but for a sudden and unlooked-for circumstance.

The negro, who was looking eagerly toward the low sand-bank, now exclaimed,—

"Golly, Massa, I'se jess a-gwine to swim for it!" and then, before he could be prevented, he leaped upon the car rail, and dove straight down into the sea.

The airship was perhaps at that moment not far from eight hundred feet above the water, and there could be but one result from that long dive—instant death. But the remaining occupants of the light car did not witness the fatal disaster. For, suddenly relieved of one hundred and fifty pounds of weight, the balloon sprang aloft with a force that pulled the anchor from the soft mud or sand in which it had embedded itself. Up, up, it sped, until it was a mile above the earth, and again in the grasp of the strong current from the north, and sweeping rapidly out to sea.

Before it reached its great height, how-

ever, the aeronaut had done two things which surprised his comrades. He had deliberately closed the escape valve, and drawn the anchor into the car.

"Why have you done that, professor?" Mr. Todd ventured to inquire.

The reply was prompt, and showed that Mr. Barton had decided upon the proper course of action, even in such an emergency as had now arisen.

"We must now cross the gulf, and will need every ounce of gas we have left to take us over."

"But where shall we land?" the astonished manufacturer finally managed to gasp out.

"On the coast of Yucatan, six hundred miles away," was the startling answer.

For some minutes the man and the lads gazed at each other, and then Todd said with a faint attempt at pleasantry:—

"Well, Rod, it has turned out as you predicted. We are getting rather more of a balloon ride than I counted on. I own up."

"That is fair, I'm sure," his cousin rejoined; "but I'll tell you how I look at it. Since it is a ride we cannot help or shorten in any way, why not make the best of it? For one, I'm prepared to accept all the discomfitures that may arise from it. What troubles me more is

the uncertainty that will hang over our fate, and the consequent suspense our mothers will be in until we reach some centre of civilization where we can send them some word."

"That is a manly speech, my son," Mr. Todd exclaimed, grasping the boy's hand in further token of his appreciation of it; "and if from this hour until I am again under our home roof you hear me complaining, I trust you will promptly remind me of the fact. We must face the situation we are now in like men, and extricate ourselves from it with all the heroism possible. It is not ourselves, but the loved ones at home who anxiously wait for tidings from us, who will be the greatest sufferers."

The quick nod that Todd gave his chum revealed his own sympathy with the sentiments that had been expressed, while Professor Barton, with some tremor in his voice, said:—

"If any carelessness or neglect of mine had precipitated this runaway, Mr. Todd, I should find it hard to forgive myself. As it is, and knowing well the stuff these young fellows have in them, I am now only anxious that you and I may throughout this unhappy adventure be to them examples of fortitude and courage."

A moment later he added: -

[&]quot;Bad as our situation is, comrades, we might

be in a worse one. We have had a hearty dinner, and there is food enough left, if economized, to furnish us with two more meals—say a breakfast and lunch to-morrow. By that time, at our present rate of speed, we should be in sight of the Yucatan coast, and shall doubtless be able to land in full strength and vigor—an important item in the problem we shall have before us: that of extricating ourselves from the country.

"As for our friends, we will do all we can to acquaint them with our whereabouts. I have a few floating tablets in the car, and every few hours we will drop a message into the sea, hoping it may eventually fall into the hands of some one who will send it to the nearest telegraph

station."

The first message was soon ready, and read:

On BOARD BALLOON HALCYON, Oct. 25, 1886. 2.30 P.M.

Twenty miles off south coast of Louisiana, moving rapidly toward Yucatan. Should reach there to-morrow afternoon. Have lost negro Thomas, who leaped into the sea; all others well and in good spirits. Some food aboard.

Signed,

BARTON.

Send message to W. B. Rodman, Bayville, Me., and Mrs. H. L. Barton, Worcester, Mass.

This was first wrapped in waterproof cloth, and then enclosed in a cork jacket, which was cast over the side of the car.

As it floated slowly down toward the placid bosom of the great gulf, every occupant of the basket breathed a prayer that it might be found and sent to the loved ones in the North, as yet ignorant of the strange mishap that had befallen their absent friends.

The hours passed on; night came, cloudless and beautiful; the wind held strong from the north; the airship flew noiselessly on.

Morning dawned; the sun rose in its golden chariot from the sea, and glimmered across the dancing waters; the balloon, a thousand feet lower than it had been the night before, still moved rapidly due south. One occupant of the car alone saw the matchless sunrise. It was Rod, who had the morning watch; all the others slept soundly.

An hour later, however, they were awake, and partaking of the little food portioned out to each one. At Mr. Todd's suggestion the small supply they had was divided into four equal portions—two for that day and two for the morrow.

"It is wiser to make it last as long as possible," he said, and there had been no dissent. Noon came, and way off in the south what looked like a big bank of clouds was seen; at two o'clock the watchers were sure it was the shore of Yucatan; at four they could discern mountains and forest; at six, unless something happened, they would have made the passage of the gulf, and be over terra firma once more.

But that something happened. It was even then on its way. Had the aeronauts been lower down, they would have detected its coming sooner. The still air, the intense heat, the swelling puffs of air from the northwest, would have warned them of the imminent hurricane. But at their high altitude they did not discover its approach, until the airship suddenly stopped, gyrated a few times, and then started off to the southeast, chased by the gathering clouds, the gleaming lightning, the rolling thunder, and the terrific wind which mark the West Indian tornado.

In five minutes they were in the clutches of a tempest which swept them by Yucatan and over the Caribbean Sea at a speed of not less than one hundred miles an hour.

CHAPTER VI.

BACK TO EARTH.

As the balloon changed its course, and rushed eastward in the lap of the great storm, Mr. Todd and the lads met with the greatest surprise they had yet experienced during their eventful and unexpected voyage. They had clutched the sides of the tiny car, as the tornado caught them, with the expectation that it would be so swayed and tossed under the tremendous blasts that it would be difficult for them to keep within it. But to their astonishment the basket moved off before the tempest as quietly and as smoothly as though wafted by a summer zephyr. The explanation of this strange circumstance Professor Barton immediately gave:—

"Whatever position the gas sack may assume, or however much that may be swayed or tossed by the wind, the car is so ingeniously hung that it always preserves its equilibrium. We are in no danger of being upset, however strong the airy currents may be. There is our danger!"

and he pointed toward a sharp flash of lightning that at that moment illumined the great cloud which overshadowed them. "If the lightning strikes the gas sack, we shall suddenly collapse, and go tumbling down into the sea."

"Is it a common catastrophe?" the manufacturer asked, but there was no trepidation apparent in his tones. Evidently he was already putting his previous determination into practice, - to meet heroically every untoward circumstance they were compelled to face.

"Fortunately not," the aeronaut replied; "the silk covering is a non-conductor, and though I have frequently been in and run through thunder clouds with my balloons, I have never met with such an accident. I do not look for it now. Still, it is always a menacing danger until we are rid of the storm."

Hour after hour passed; the tornado still swept them on with undiminished power; the flashes of lightning with their accompanying thunder scarcely abated.

"How is this, professor?" Mr. Todd at length asked. "I thought these West Indian

tempests were of short duration."

"Had we been on an island when the tor-

nado struck us," Mr. Barton explained, "we should long ago have been through with it. In an incredibly short time it would have swept over us, leaving the marks of its devastation on every hand. But we are not stationary, and the storm does not, therefore, blow over us. Rather, we are carried before it, and so shall have to endure it until it has spent its force, or worn itself out. That may be in six hours, or in twelve. Probably we shall be left way out on the Atlantic, far from land, and with not a breath of air to waft us in any direction."

His prophecy was correct. As the morning of October 27 dawned, the *Halcyon*, scarcely a thousand feet high, hung motionless above the broad ocean. There was water to the right of them, water to the left of them, water everywhere, but not a speck of land in sight.

Not far from their usual breakfast hour they ate one half of the food they still possessed, and then Mr. Todd remarked, very cheerfully, considering the circumstances.

sidering the circumstances: —

"I wonder how long this calm will continue."

"Until afternoon, probably," Professor Barton answered. "Then we shall get a breeze driving us to the southwest. At least, that is what I expect, and am quite confident I shall not be disappointed."

"What makes you think so, professor?" Todd asked, glancing down at the great silver mirror beneath him, to see if he could detect any signs of a coming breeze on its surface.

"In this locality, at this time of the year, the prevailing winds are toward the coast," the aeronaut replied with a smile; "and as the lull after such a hurricane as we have experienced is apt to be followed by normal atmospheric conditions, I look for a strong breeze to set in toward the South American coast within six or eight hours."

"Is that the nearest land?" Rod inquired.

"Undoubtedly," the professor responded, "as you can easily think out for yourselves. Last night at six o'clock we were off the north end of Yucatan. Then came the tornado, sweeping us easterly and southerly at a terrific rate of speed. Our drop in latitude we can only approximate; but say it was ten degrees. Yucatan is not far from the twentieth parallel, and we now are therefore on or near the tenth, or a little north of the Orinoco River. At noon I will determine our longitude, and then tell you how far we are east of that river's mouth."

"How are you going to do it?" the lads

asked together.

"By a means so simple you ought to be able

to find out for yourselves," Mr. Barton retorted, laughingly. "I wonder you do not immediately guess it."

"I don't see what you mean," Todd began

slowly, but was interrupted by his uncle:-

"Neither do I, my lad; but let us think it out. We must not allow the professor to be the only one in this party who can use his brains when difficulties confront us. We must all learn to think, to think quickly, and to think advantageously. See, now, which one of us can solve this problem first. Speak out when you have it!"

"That is right," Professor Barton said, and nodding his head approvingly. "It is a very simple process. Either one of you can tell where we are longitudinally as easily as I can. It's young brains against older ones. Let us see which will win."

Rod sat in the eastern part of the car, his left side close up against the stout wickerwork. He glanced over at the sun with a feeling that that would in some way solve the problem for him. Then, with no other thought than that of seeing what time it was, he drew his watch from his vest pocket with his left hand—an act that was unnoticed by any of his companions. To his surprise the time-keeper marked the

hour as half-past four, when he knew it must be at least seven o'clock. He puzzled for a moment over this discovery, and then like a flash it occurred to him that his watch was set to the meridian of New Orleans, while he was now miles and miles east of the city. He dropped the time-piece back into his pocket, and turned toward the aeronaut, remarking in tones of such evident disgust his comrades could not help laughing:—

"What simpletons we are! When it is noon here you will take out your watch and note the difference in time between this place and the meridian of New Orleans, and so compute the meridian we are now on."

"Exactly," answered the professor, when the laugh the boy had raised subsided. "New Orleans happens to be directly on the ninetieth meridian west from Greenwich. If, then, my watch, which is set to the meridian of that city, marks ten o'clock when it is noon here, we are thirty degrees east of New Orleans, and so on the sixtieth meridian. As each four minutes of time will give us a degree of longitude, we can tell almost precisely the meridian we are on when the noon hour has come."

"But I don't see how you can tell how far we are from the South American coast, even then," Todd objected. "You will only have the distance you are east of the Crescent City."

"I happen to know that the longitude of the mouth of the Orinoco is almost exactly sixty, west," the aeronaut explained; "that is, the difference in time between New Orleans and the mouth of the Orinoco is two hours. If, therefore, my watch at noon gives the difference between New Orleans and here as two hours and four minutes, we are one degree east of the river, or sixty-nine miles away. Eight minutes over two hours will give us two degrees, or one hundred and thirty-eight miles. So at noon I expect to settle the point of how far we are from the nearest land. Then when the breeze comes we can make a fair estimate of the time it will take us to reach it. You see that our situation, after our repeated disasters, is in no sense a hopeless one."

Professor Barton spoke hopefully, yet it was with considerable impatience on the part of the younger aeronauts, if not on the part of the older ones, that they waited for the noon hour.

To get the difference in time as accurately as possible, the professor unhung one of the leaves of the small table, and fastened a slender measuring rod, which he happened to have in the car, upright in one end of it. Then he ran the board out from the centre of the basket directly to the south.

"There," he said, "that leaf is the meridian running through and bisecting the car, and when the upright casts its slight shadow only to the north or directly along the centre of the board toward the basket it is noon. I'll watch the stick, and you, Rod, can mark the time. When I say 'Noon!' give us the exact minute."

The arrangements were completed a few minutes before the sun reached the line, and then, with the eye of the professor on the board, and the eye of the lad on his watch, they waited. Two, three minutes ticked away. Then Mr. Barton called out,—

"Noon!"

"Twelve minutes to ten!" Rod announced.

"We are on or near the fifty-seventh meridian then, or three degrees east of the Orinoco," the aeronaut said, with evident exultation.

"Only two hundred and seven miles from the shore!" shouted Todd. "Hurrah!"

"Say two hundred miles in round numbers," Professor Barton added; "now for a strong east wind, and we will see land in eight or ten hours."

"Provided we are on the tenth parallel," interposed Mr. Todd. "What if we are above or below that line, professor?"

"If above it, we shall have somewhat farther to go to reach the coast; if below it, we shall not have to go so far. In either case, it will make but a few hours difference in our journey. South America is west of us, and we cannot help reaching it with a favorable breeze. More now depends on the wind than on any error we may have made in our latitude."

A half-hour later the balloon quivered, then swung gently to the southwest; in thirty-five minutes it was moving slowly in that direction; in an hour it glided along before a tenknot breeze; at two o'clock it was rushing landward at a speed which promised to bring its occupants in sight of the coast before dark, if it was not over two hundred miles off; at six a long, low bank just above the western horizon marked the place where the great continent lay.

"We will now throw out our last floating tablet," the professor said, as his sharp eyes detected the distant land; and after a brief consultation with his companions he wrote the following:—

On Balloon Halcyon, Oct. 27, 1886. 6 P.M.

Left New Orleans, U.S.A., Oct. 25, I P.M. Off coast of Yucatan Oct. 26, 6 P.M. Driven east and south for twelve hours by gale. Position estimated Oct. 27, I2 M.: Longitude 57 west; Latitude 10 north. South American coast now in sight; wind northeast; speed about thirty miles an hour. Negro lost overboard. All others well.

Signed,

BARTON.

To this were added the usual addresses, and then it was secured as carefully as the previous messages, and flung from the car.

It was destined to a more fortunate fate, however, than any of its predecessors. While they were never heard from, this one was picked up a month later off the harbor of Georgetown, British Guiana, by an English sailor, and delivered to his captain. That officer carried it to the American consul, who promptly cabled its contents to the States. About the first of December, therefore, the dark cloud of uncertainty which had overshadowed three northern homes was momentarily lifted; and three womanly hearts imbibed a faith that never wavered through all the months that followed—a faith that the wilds

of South America would some day deliver up their loved ones, and they should see them again.

Immediately after the cork float with its brief but all-important story had been cast overboard, the aeronauts partook of their remaining food, - and a scanty meal it made for two hearty men and two growing boys, who for over fifty hours had been on short allowance. But the partakers were as cheerful over it as though they sat at a table in Delmonico's, feasting upon all the delicacies of the season. The nearness of the coast, and the bright prospect of a safe landing within a few hours, doubtless had much to do with their cheerfulness. But again they were doomed to disappointment. Long before the shore was reached, a heavy fog rolled in from the ocean, hiding land and sea alike from their eyes. Night also shut down, and they could not even tell when they were over terra firma. The wind, moreover, blew stronger than it had at any time during the afternoon; and, anxious as all were to make a descent at the earliest moment practicable, they felt that there was wisdom in Professor Barton's decision: -

"Though we are carried many miles into the interior, we must wait until dawn before we attempt to land."

That voyage rapidly on through the darkness affected the three amateur aeronauts strangely. Above them were the stars shining brightly; below them was a great pall, hiding forest and fields, hills and dales, from their sight. The land they had been so eager to reach was now only a thousand feet away, and yet their descent was as impossible as it would have been had the distance measured a thousand miles. What strange fate was this that continually overshadowed them, shutting off their opportunity of landing just at the moment it seemed most assured?

Would it reassert itself at dawn, and send the air ship flying off in some new direction, or would they be permitted to make a safe return to terra firma? If so, where would it be? In village or on mountain top? Amid rude savagery, or semi-civilization, or in some uninhabited region? Would it be a place from which they could easily extricate themselves, or some spot from which it would take long months and infinite toil to return to the coast?

These and many other similar questions crowded into the minds of the young aeronauts, and freely they mentioned them to their older companions; but no one could give a definite answer to any of them.

"If we reached the coast north of the mouth of the Orinoco," said the professor, "we have long since crossed it, and are scores of miles beyond. If we touched the shore south of the river, the word scores must be changed to hundreds. The only certain thing is, we are rushing southward into the very heart of South America."

No one slept. Under the circumstances they could not sleep. With eyes strained to pierce the semi-darkness that surrounded them, they watched and waited.

An hour after midnight Todd, who had just glanced down at the great curtain of mist below him, exclaimed excitedly:—

"Why, the fog is most up to the car, professor!"

"I know it," was the calm response.

"Can it be we are falling?" the lad immediately asked, and thus revealed the reason for his excitement.

"No, I think not," Professor Barton answered. "We are only running over higher ground. Help me to unbend the anchor from the cable, and I will show you."

In the darkness the iron, which nearly three days before had been fastened to the huge rope, was removed, and then the loose end of

the latter was dropped over the side of the basket. Before a third of it was payed out, however, it was evident to all that it had touched and was dragging along the ground.

"We are running among the hills," the aeronaut announced after he had held the rope a few minutes, "and we are nearer to them than I supposed. We must ascend, or we shall soon be buried in the fog and exposed to numerous dangers. Quick! Throw out the rest of the cable!"

In an instant the great coil had disappeared over the side of the car, and after it the professor sent two or three bags of ballast. The entire weight cast out could not have been less than two hundred pounds, and the effect was magical. Up sped the balloon, out of the mist, toward the shining stars, and soon was at so great a height there seemed only darkness and void beneath its occupants.

Striking a match Professor Barton looked at his barometer.

"That is fine!" he then exclaimed. "We are now over five thousand feet above the sea, and not likely to be troubled with fogs or hills again to-night."

But he was mistaken. Two or three hours later Rod, who sat in the forward end of the

car, touched the professor's arm, asking in a low tone: —

"What is that ahead of us, sir? I have been

trying to make it out for some minutes."

The aeronaut looked in the direction the lad had indicated, and saw what seemed to be a huge barrier rising directly across their pathway. To the right, to the left, and upward it extended, until lost in the surrounding darkness.

"It is a mountain peak, rising abruptly from its surrounding plain, and a high one, too. We must rise above it, or we shall be wrecked," the professor exclaimed.

As he spoke he picked up a bag of ballast and threw it from the basket.

"Shall I put over another?" the willing Rod asked.

"Yes, all we have; the anchor, the ropes, the table, the hampers, — every loose thing. Clear the basket! All must go or we are lost."

His companions worked expeditiously, and in two minutes everything in the car but themselves had been thrown out. On they went; up the balloon sped; and yet still above them that perpendicular cliff towered.

"It is no use, comrades! Clamber after me into the netting! We must put the gas sack between us and the mountain! It is the only

chance to save ourselves. Hang on for dear life; the blow will be a terrific one!"

The next minute he, followed by Mr. Todd and the two boys, was climbing up the roping

that encased the gas sack.

"Look! there is a star off in the southwestern horizon. It means that I can see over the peak!" Mr. Barton said, when he was thirty or forty feet above the car. "We have but to rise a few feet more, and we -"

He never finished that sentence. He had no time to do it. For the balloon at that moment struck with a tremendous shock against the mountain side. The crash of a breaking car, the sound of rending silk followed, and then the great gas bag sank slowly down over the mountain top.

"Here, follow me! Don't leap off, however, until I give the word! We must drop together, for the sack, relieved of the weight of a single one of us, will fly away, carrying the others

with it."

His comrades understood, and side by side with him they crept up the netting, over the end, and down the great curving top of the balloon. In a few minutes the professor, who had been counting the meshes as they descended, cried out: -

"Ready! Swing your feet clear of the ropes! Now, drop together!"

As one man the four let go the sack, and without jar or bruise struck the ground; while the wrecked air ship, suddenly relieved of their weight, swung up and off of the cliffs and disappeared in the darkness.

The four aeronauts, without food, without weapons of any kind, were stranded on some unknown mountain peak in the great southern

continent.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY.

Professor Barton's first act, when the wrecked balloon had disappeared, was to make sure that none of his comrades were injured; then he endeavored to obtain some idea of their immediate surroundings. In the darkness which still hung over the mountain top, however, it was difficult to form any definite opinion of the adjacent objects.

Two things alone were certain: they were standing upon a small rocky plateau, so level as to suggest a pavement; and a dozen feet behind them yawned a precipice of tremendous depth. Everything else was only conjecture.

On their right and left the darkness was so thick as to suggest — what later proved to be a reality — that there were rocky heights on either hand. In front of them alone was there anything like a clear vision. Through the heavy darkness which closed in on both sides there seemed to be an opening, for the starry

vault overhead swept down in unbroken line to the level of their own horizon, and there - away off in the west -- twinkled the stars which the aeronaut had noticed while climbing into the netting of the balloon, assuring him of the joyous fact he hastened to make known to his companions - that they were now above the summit of the great cliff, and there was a

promise of a safe landing.

Another circumstance also confirmed the existence of an open way in that direction. The stiff night breeze, which had hurled the balloon with such terrific force against the mountain side, rushed by them and straight on toward the distant stars with a shrill, whistling sound, announcing as clearly as though it had the power of speech, "I have an uninterrupted passage through the cliffs." The quick eye and alert ear of the professor noted all these facts, and pointing them out to Mr. Todd and the lads, he added reverently: -

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, we have been providentially led to the only place on this summit where we could make a safe exit from the wrecked air ship; while in front of us there seems to be an opportunity to descend its western side. As soon as it is light enough to pick our way, we will make the attempt, and

may the same protecting Power soon lead us into a region of plenty, for I am well-nigh famished."

"I don't think any of us would be so particular as to the kind of food we found as to the quantity," Rod remarked, with a little laugh.

While Todd, with a heavy yawn, asked: "What is there to prevent us from getting a little sleep, sir? I am as tired as I am

hungry."

"I know of nothing that can harm us up here," Mr. Barton promptly responded; "we will find, if we can, some sheltered nook, and take a short rest."

"It cannot be many hours before light," the manufacturer said, as the little party followed

their leader up the plateau.

"No; not over two or three at the most," the aeronaut assented; "but even that amount of sleep will refresh us, and here is a place where we shall be quite out of the wind."

As he spoke, he stepped back of some dark object which suddenly loomed up before them. His comrades were close at his back, and immediately found themselves in the lee of a huge boulder or sudden projection of the cliff, though in the darkness they could not tell which. The ground at its foot, however, was smooth, and quickly stretching themselves at full length upon the hard bed, the four castaways were soon fast asleep.

It seemed to Rod that he had slept but a moment when he awoke. It was light, though the sun had not yet risen. Sitting up, he looked about him. Directly in front of him was a passageway, perhaps a hundred feet wide, its rocky sides and floor as smooth as though hewn. This extended westward for perhaps an eighth of a mile, where it suddenly terminated, as if at the verge of a precipice. That the declivity was not of great depth, however, was clear, for he could see the tops of some trees swaying back and forth in the morning breeze at no great distance beyond its line of termination.

Directly behind and to his left, the steep side of the cliff arose forty or fifty feet. At his right, and but a few feet beyond him, the passageway, somewhat narrowed because of the projection behind which he and his companions had found shelter, went on, apparently to the edge of the great precipice where the balloon struck a few hours before, though he from his position could not see so far. Beside him, his father and Todd were still sleeping; but the professor was gone.

Somewhat alarmed at this discovery, the boy sprang to his feet and ran along the side of the niche to the continuation of the passage. He noticed first that this soon broadened into a small but irregular plateau, hemmed in on both sides by sharp, jagged, and irregular peaks—none, however, of great height. Then he saw the professor standing on the extreme edge of the cliff, evidently surveying the spot where the airship had been wrecked.

Running down the rocky platform, the boy was soon near the aeronaut, whom he greeted with a hearty good morning.

"Good morning, Rod," Mr. Barton responded, no less heartily; and then with a sweeping gesture he asked,—

"Did you ever see anything like that before?"

Stepping along until close beside his friend, Rod took in the stupendous scene. Straight down went the precipice, so far that meadow and forest at its foot blended into one level mass of green; north and south it extended, as far as the eye could see, with little if any variation in the dizzy depths; while the whole great perpendicular formed the mightiest wall of red sandstone the human eye ever looked upon.

The color and character of the rock did not escape the notice of the youthful observer, and at once started a train of thought in his mind with which he became so absorbed he made no reply to the question Professor Barton had just asked him. That gentleman, however, did not seem surprised at the lad's silence. He was himself nearly overwhelmed by the stupendous size of the precipice on which he stood, and did not speak again until the sun, almost with a bound, came above the distant horizon, and flooded the forests and fields thousands of feet below them with its rays. Then he said:—

"Awe-inspiring as this view is, Rod, we must not linger here. Let us return to the niche and, awaking our comrades, begin our descent."

Mechanically the lad, still busy with his own thoughts, followed him back up the plateau to the nook where they had left their sleeping companions, whom they found up and on the lookout for them.

"Good morning, professor, have you and Rod figured out just where we are in this great continent?" was the manufacturer's greeting as he caught sight of the aeronaut.

"Hardly," the professor confessed with a

smile. "At noon we can fix our longitude, but our latitude will not be so easily determined. I am sure, however, that we are still north of the equator."

"But I know right where we are," was Rod's

startling interruption.

His three companions stared at him a moment as if trying to decide whether he had lost his senses or was merely joking. He soon proved that he was speaking in all seriousness. Taking his wallet from his pocket, he opened it, and took out a small slip, evidently a clipping from some newspaper. Holding this in his hand, he turned to Professor Barton.

"Professor," he asked, "did you ever hear of Mount Roraima?"

"I certainly have," answered he; "it is the sacred mountain of Venezuela, though little is known of it, and no man has ever explored it."

"Why not?" persisted Rod.

"I remember," broke in Todd; "you found a description of the mountain in one of the New York papers we had on the steamer Knickerbocker, and called my attention to it, saying you were going to save the item, and study up the matter more thoroughly when

you returned home. That is the article you

have there in your hand."

"Yes," admitted Rod. "But read the sketch, professor, and then tell me if I am not right. Surely the great wall yonder answers to this article in every particular."

As the boy spoke he passed the clipping to

the aeronaut, who read it aloud: -

"There is yet a field for the explorer well within access of our own country. Near the border between Venezuela and British Guiana, but on the Venezuelan side, there lies a curious mountain, or mountain chain. This the Indians call Roraima, and hold in superstitious veneration. Its red sandstone walls rise abrupt and rugged to a height of seven thousand five hundred feet. It is inaccessible on all sides, so far as known. In size it is rather a lofty tableland than a mountain, its summit being a fairly level plain, estimated to be more than one hundred and fifty square miles in extent, and believed to be covered with vegetation."

"There are your red sandstone walls," Rod exclaimed, when the reading was finished, and pointing toward the great precipice he had just left, "and there is your vegetation," pointing down the passage toward the swaying tree-tops. "Is it likely, professor, that there are two mountains in the world that will answer that description? Again recall the course of our balloon,

and the distance we probably covered during the night hours, and tell me, does not Mount Roraima lie almost directly in our path? I've worked the problem through since I saw that red cliff, sir, and I'm sure I'm right. This is the sacred mountain of Venezuela."

Professor Barton was silent a few moments, apparently reviewing his young colleague's

argument. Then he replied: -

"The description of the mountain is entirely on your side, Rod; and a few changes in my data of yesterday will throw our line of travel on your side also. If we touched the coast south of the mouth of the Orinoco, say at about the eighth parallel, or in the region of Georgetown, British Guiana, there is no reason why we should not have reached the locality of Mount Roraima in our run of last night. My reckoning of our position yesterday noon as on the tenth parallel was purely arbitrary, as you will remember. I then stated we might be farther south. Viewing the problem from all sides, I am disposed, therefore, to agree with you, and believe this summit to be that of the sacred mountain."

"If so, we have another interesting problem before us," remarked Todd. "It is how to get down."

"Say, rather, we have two new and most interesting problems thrust upon us," answered the aeronaut with a laugh. "We must first explore a region on which man never before set foot, and then find a way to carry our discoveries to the civilized world."

"You think the mountain uninhabited, then?" inquired Mr. Todd.

"Undoubtedly," responded the professor.

"Then this passage is a natural one," the manufacturer commented, glancing up and down the cliffs. "One can hardly believe it, though, the walls are so regular; and then, too, the floor looks as if it had been worn smooth with the tread of many feet."

"Nothing but the action of the elements upon the soft stone," replied Mr. Barton, somewhat brusquely. "How can man ever have scaled those precipitous cliffs? No, we shall have the great plateau to ourselves, you may be sure, and our first duty is to see what it offers us in the way of food. Come on!"

He started off down the passage, and his comrades, no less eager to satisfy their own hunger, hastened after him.

In less than five minutes they reached the termination of the pass. The sun had not yet risen high enough in the heavens to flood the mountain summit with its rays, still there was sufficient light to reveal to the four observers a scene of entrancing beauty—a scene, too, so unexpected and bewildering that all stopped and stared in amazement—a scene which immediately scattered the theory of Professor Barton to the four winds, and assured every beholder that he was gazing upon the greatest historic wonder of the nineteenth century.

A broad stairway, hewn out of the solid rock, descended from the place where they were standing to a paved roadway, not far from eighteen feet wide. Then this roadway went straight down a gentle slope to a small village a mile

away.

Emerging from the farther side of this hamlet the paved street kept its course down the sloping plain for at least three miles, where it entered a large town situated near the juncture of two streams of considerable size.

Beyond that town the stone highway could still be traced, as it followed the right bank of the river for six or eight miles to the shore of a large lake.

On each side of this roadway were fields under a high state of cultivation, orchards radiant with flowers and fruit, and pastures in which herds of animals of some kind were feeding, while low, one-story, but roomy houses of stone dotted the entire landscape from the rugged cliffs down to the placid mirror at the centre of the plateau.

Beyond the lake, which was not unlike a pear in shape, the beholders could catch glimpses of towns and villages, of fields and orchards, as far as they could see. The plain also widened rapidly as it ran toward the lake, so that both its northern and southern boundaries were beyond the range of vision of the astonished observers. They noted, however, that rivers emptied into the lake on both the north and south sides, and that there were indications of good-sized towns farther up their banks.

But the crowning wonder of the whole scene was at the lake itself. On an island, so near the centre of the sparkling sheet of water as to suggest an artificial construction, was a great city. Tier after tier of streets arose from the water's edge to a height of two hundred feet, and there, at the apex of the architectural pile, stood a great bell-shaped building — possibly a temple.

The most striking feature of the town, however, was its color. All the other buildings of the plateau, so far as they could see, were built of dark red sandstone. But the city in every part was constructed of some material of dazzling whiteness. From the water's edge to temple top it glistened in the morning light one massive pile of spotless hue.

For some minutes the castaways stood there, silently taking in the marvellous picture. Then

Mr. Todd spoke: -

"What is this, professor? What do you make of it? Is this an earthly paradise, or some fairyland, or are we dreaming?"

"It is a reality, but that is all I can tell you. I am amazed, bewildered, perplexed. This plateau evidently teems with life, and has a civilization all its own."

Then he turned to Rod, and continued with mock seriousness:—

"Look here, youngster, you have told us where we are, and I believe it. Now tell us who these dwellers are, how they came here, and whether it is safe to venture among them. Have you any clipping in your pocket, or theory in your head, that can account for what you see?"

"No, sir," Rod replied laughingly, "and I don't believe any one but those people yonder can answer your first two questions, while only a trial can answer the third. But it seems to me that we are compelled to test their hospital-

ity. What else can we do?"

"Nothing," admitted the aeronaut. "We must go on."

He started down the steps, followed by his comrades. Reaching the paved road-bed without difficulty, they hastened along it, eager to arrive at the nearest dwellings.

The fields on either side of the way as they advanced seemed to be less fertile than those farther down the slope, and were apparently given over to forest or pasture. In the opens herds of strange animals were also frequently seen.

"They are llamas," the professor declared; "and this section may be a royal or public park. Notice how free from all undergrowth the woods are, and how numerous are the ungainly but useful beasts. Possibly the village we are approaching is where the royal or public herdsmen dwell;" a surmise on the part of the speaker which they sometime afterward found to be substantially correct.

"The llamas are also known as Peruvian sheep, and that ancient people built paved roads throughout their empire, did they not?" Mr. Todd now inquired. "Can it be this is some branch of that old race?"

"The same thought has already occurred to me," Mr. Barton answered; "the architecture of those buildings on ahead would also seem to confirm that view. But if true, how came they here, so far from the mother land? How did they scale the great walls of the plateau? These, and a dozen other questions of interest to the historian and archæologist, naturally arise. Who shall answer them but the people before us? We must wait and learn."

"If they are Incas, we have nothing to fear," Todd here remarked; "for I have read that naturally they are of a mild and peaceful disposition."

"We shall soon know how they will treat us, for there is a boy staring at us from the nearest house," Rod announced.

All looked in the direction of the dwelling, and were in time to see a lad of perhaps twelve years, tall, slender, olive-hued, and with dark, straight hair, standing at the open doorway, and gazing up the road at them.

The next instant he disappeared within the building, only to reappear a minute later, when

he ran off into the village.

Two or three heads, evidently those of grown people of both sexes, peered out of the door from time to time, but no one else left the house until the lad, who had gone into the hamlet, returned with an old, dignified, and

patriarchal looking man by his side. Behind these two came a crowd of old and young, apparently the entire population of the little town. This was immediately swelled by nearly a dozen people of all ages and sizes from the first or nearest habitation; then all advanced up the road to meet the coming strangers.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE GODS HAVE COME DOWN TO US."

"Perhaps we had better await them here," Professor Barton suggested in a low tone to his companions, and halting abruptly in the middle of the highway. They assented, and, drawing up beside him, closely watched the

approaching throng.

Certainly there was nothing in its appearance to alarm them. It was a motley crowd of men, women, and children, who pushed and hustled each other good-naturedly in their endeavor to get sight of the unexpected visitors. But withal, they were comparatively noiseless. There were no shoutings, no violent gesticulations, and no threatenings of any kind. A few low exclamations of amazement, an occasional craning of the neck to obtain a better view of the strangers, a constant exhibition of faces, on which curiosity rather than fear was depicted — these were their only demonstrations as they followed their patriarchal leader up the street.

He, leaning one hand on the shoulder of the lad who had discovered the newcomers, advanced in dignified silence. If astonished at what he beheld, he gave no evidence of it. Possibly he felt that his position as headsman of the village necessitated a certain amount of stoicism on his part, and with admirable self-

control suppressed his real feelings.

When within fifty feet of the halting men, he paused, while his attendants huddled close about him, as though determined to lose no part of the coming interview. There was an instant's waiting, then the old chief quickly raised his right hand and extended it palm outward toward the visitors. It was the sign of peace — common to all the Indian tribes of the American continent. Professor Barton recognized it, and as quickly returned the movement. For a moment the two men — so unlike in hue and dress — stood there in precisely the same attitude, and then the native dropped his hand, and in a deep, rich voice addressed his visitors.

It was a short speech, absolutely unintelligible to the men addressed, yet there was both a courtesy and a grace in it which were unmistakable. There could be no doubt of the speaker's friendliness.

"He is asking who we are, and how we came here, I expect," the professor remarked in an undertone; "but he will not understand me any better than I do him."

He took a step forward, however, and, becoming the spokesman of his party, said in

English,—

"We are unfortunate aeronauts, left on your cliffs last night, and we ask first for food and drink; then for a safe passage through your land to the plains below — if there's any way to get down."

A puzzled look crossed the old native's face, and slowly shaking his head, he uttered a single sentence.

"Of course you don't comprehend; I didn't suppose you would," Mr. Barton muttered, with some disgust. Then he repeated his message, first in Spanish, then in French, and finally in German, but without making himself understood. He had now exhausted his whole list of languages, and was at a loss how to make the needs of himself and comrades known.

It was Todd who found a way out of this sore dilemma. Hungrier than he had ever been before in all his life, and all out of patience with a parley that, as he afterward expressed it, "was keeping good food out of

his mouth," he at this moment rushed over to the lad who was standing beside the old chief, and grasped him by the hand. Shaking it vigorously, he exclaimed:—

"Say, whatever your name is, we are just about starved. Get us something to eat right off, will you?" and then he rapidly went through

the motions of eating and drinking.

If his words had no meaning to the surprised boy, it was not so with his pantomime. For with a smile and a nod which plainly said, "I understand you," the youngster turned to the old man and talked earnestly with him for a few moments. Then the latter bowed ceremoniously toward the professor, whom he seemed to regard as the leader of the little party of strangers, and pointing back to the hamlet, beckoned for him and his companions to follow him there.

This movement was hailed with demonstrations of delight by his people, and like a band of frolicsome children they ran on before their chief toward the village. As the castaways entered this, they saw it was a small affair, consisting of perhaps twenty low, stone houses, ten on each side of the street. The building at the extreme end of the hamlet was a trifle larger than the others, and about this the crowd

gathered. Evidently it was the residence of their ruler.

The door was open, — left so probably when the headsman had been summoned to go out and meet the strangers, - and through this, and down a dark passageway to an open court, he led his visitors. The floor was paved and scrupulously clean, but save two or three stone benches was destitute of all furniture. Motioning his guests to be seated here, the host turned to a number of the persons of both sexes who had followed him into the building, and who were doubtless members of his own household, and issued what seemed to be several rapid orders. For there was a scurrying of feet toward the rooms which opened into the court, and the sounds of busy preparation and the odor of cooking food soon filled the place.

As the last attendant hurried away to execute some assigned task, the chieftain himself with a low bow to the waiting strangers also disappeared through a door at the rear of the court — perhaps to personally superintend or hasten the coming meal.

Left alone, the stranded aeronauts looked at each other. Mr. Todd was the first to speak. "Well, professor, what do you think of our situation?" he asked.

"That we shall soon have something to eat, thanks to your namesake," he replied with a smile.

"Yes, of course," Mr. Todd admitted; "but I mean the people, our surroundings, the outlook. What of these?"

"I am sure we have stumbled upon some branch of the ancient Peruvians," Mr. Barton responded. "This house is quite like those occupied by the peasant class in Peru. The people themselves resemble the full-blooded Indians I have seen there. And the language they speak sounds like the Quichua dialect, which I have frequently heard, but unfortunately am unacquainted with. The singularity about the whole matter is, that we should find such a people on this isolated mountain top, and with every evidence of a long sojourn here."

"Is there not a tradition that some of the people fled into the wilderness before their Spanish conquerors?" questioned Rod, thoughtfully. "I am sure I have read something of that kind in connection with the history of the Incas."

"There is such a tradition, and it has assumed various forms," the professor promptly answered. "One story is, that on the death of the last Inca some of the nobles took his eldest son, a mere

child, and fled into the great northeastern forests, where they established a second, though smaller, empire. Another is, that on the sacking of Cuzco by the Spaniards, a band of the natives, unwilling to yield submission to the invaders, seized the most valuable portion of the state treasures, and disappeared into the wilderness about the upper Amazon. This last tale was firmly believed by the Spaniards themselves, and from time to time attempts were made by them to trace the fugitives, but they were never found."

"Not until we discovered them here on

Mount Roraima," Rod persisted.

"It seems almost incredible," continued Mr. Barton, "that a small band of fugitives, heavily laden with treasure, should have made their way for hundreds of miles across the tributary waters of the Amazon into southeastern Venezuela; yet it is not an impossibility. The more serious part of the problem is how they ever scaled the surrounding cliffs and established themselves on this plateau."

"May there not be some place where it is possible to descend to the plains, known only to this people?" asked Mr. Todd. "This region has never been thoroughly explored, I

believe."

"True," the aeronaut admitted; "but that, as well as the origin of the ancient civilization we find here, are secrets wrapped in the bosoms of these natives. Not until we learn their language and secure their confidence can we hope that they will divulge them. Our first work must be to become thoroughly familiar with their speech and to convince them of our good will."

"I know one word now, if they are really the descendants of the ancient Peruvians," Rod declared. "Their word for chief was curaca, I remember. I am going to use it the first chance I have, and see if they understand it."

"It will do to begin with," the professor said laughingly; "and many a great result has come from a smaller beginning. But here comes our breakfast."

As he spoke, several women came into the court bringing earthen dishes, on which there was an abundant supply of nourishing food. There were potatoes, yams, boiled fish, dried flesh—probably of the llama—some hard cakes made of maize, and some boiled seed which resembled rice.

"Quinoa!" exclaimed Professor Barton, as soon as he noticed the last article. One of the attending women looked up quickly at him, and with a nod repeated the word, "Quinoa!"

"I've got the start of you, Rod," cried the aeronaut, gleefully. "This is the chief food of the Quichuan Indians of the poorer class. is no mere coincident that we find the same grain here, and called by the same name. It is safe for you to say 'curaca', I'm sure, when you want the old chief."

As he uttered the second Quichuan word, the same attendant turned, and repeating it, hurried away. A moment later she reappeared, accompanied by the patriarchal headsman, evidently believing that the strangers had asked for him.

Springing to his feet, Mr. Barton met the chieftain halfway down the court. Bowing low he spoke the one word, curaca, and then motioned for the old man to breakfast with him and his comrades. Though he did not then know it, no act on his part could have gone farther to establish a bond of friendship with the native who, with profuse bows and thanks, seated himself beside them and shared in the food.

Scarcely was the meal over, when a man entered the court from the street and saluted the curaca. His dress at once attracted the attention of the aeronauts. Instead of the coarse brown tunic and heavy sandals worn by the men of the hamlet, he had on a blue tunic of soft and fine material fringed with scarlet. His head and legs were bare, while on his feet were sandals so light they could not have been the slightest impediment to his running. In his hand he bore a short staff stained, like his garments, blue with a scarlet stripe — possibly the

badge of his rank or office.

"Chasquis!" the old chief exclaimed, and pointing to the newcomer. Then he began a long speech, accompanied by repeated gestures and signs, which indicated that the man was a messenger and must carry some report of the visitors to the great city in the lake. He grew more earnest as he proceeded, and apparently was pleading with his guests to give him some account of themselves, that he might send a definite message to those in authority over him.

As he ceased, a happy thought came to Professor Barton. Taking a note-book from his pocket, he tore out a blank leaf, and then with his pencil made a rude sketch of the great cliff upon it. Above this he drew a balloon with the car hanging beneath it bearing its four passengers. On the opposite side of the paper he pictured himself and comrades standing on the little plateau at the summit of the mountain,

while the balloon with empty car was sweeping off into the heavens.

When the draft was completed he showed both sides of the leaf to the curaca, and with a motion indicated that he could send the paper by the courier to the ruler of the land.

He was not prepared for what immediately took place. With bulging eyes the old man glanced at the two drawings, and then threw himself flat down before his guest, repeating over and over again the same sentence. The courier also dropped upon his face, and took up the same words; and as their voices rang through the house, men, women, and children rushed into the court, and assuming the same humble attitude, joined in the same plaintive cry.

Startled by this unexpected demonstration, the aeronaut stood there, with his drawing in his hand, staring at the prostrate natives, until Rod's quick wit found an explanation of their

otherwise unaccountable act.

Taking the paper from the professor's hand, he studied the two pictures a few minutes, and then said:—

"The poor fellows know nothing about a balloon, Professor Barton, and have taken it for the sun. They think you mean we were let down from it in a basket, and so are worship-

ping us."

This was the fact, as was ascertained some weeks later, and the cry of the prostrate natives was, "The gods have come down to us!" A supposition the more natural on their part, because the plateau where the castaways had landed was sacred to sun worship, and twice a year — when the sun crossed the line going north and returning south — was the scene of an imposing religious spectacle.

"You are right, lad," responded Mr. Barton, with a sigh of relief. Then he prepared him-

self to stop their homage.

"Curaca!" It was the voice of the professor ringing out sharply and clearly above the din; and at the word, the old man ceased his exclamations and looked up. A wave of the hand brought him to his feet, and silence in the house. "Chasquis!" was the aeronaut's next word, and as the courier arose, the drawing was thrust into his hand. A stern look, a motion toward the street, were enough, and with a bound the messenger was on his way. Another motion, and the court was cleared of all but the chieftain and his guests.

Then Professor Barton went over to one of the benches, and, throwing himself at full length upon it, closed his eyes as if asleep. Arising an instant later, he pointed at his comrades and himself, signifying that they desired some place where they could rest.

The curaca bowed low, and hurried away. Immediately some women came, and rapidly made ready two rooms at the right of the court. Extra couches were carried in, jars of water and towels were brought, heavy cotton curtains were hung at the doorways; then the chief returned, and with marked deference conducted his guests to the chambers. In a short time each one had taken a refreshing bath, and was sleeping soundly.

Five hours later they were awakened by the voice of the old headsman at their door, who, when the curtains were withdrawn, indicated by a gesture that they were wanted in the court. Following him out, there they found awaiting them a man, whose gorgeous dress proclaimed him the highest official they had yet seen. He wore a blue tunic with a wide fringe of scarlet, while on his breast was embroidered a blazing representation of the sun. A scarlet girdle encircled his waist, from which hung a goldenhilted sword; his leggings were yellow, embroidered with red; his sandals were of silver; and a blue helmet surrounded by a broad scar-

let band bearing a diminutive image of the sun was upon his head.

But whatever his rank, he was as deferential in his greeting of the strangers as the old curaca had been. First placing his right hand upon his breast, he bowed until his forehead nearly touched the ground. Then assuming an erect position, he pointed toward the street, and courteously motioned the visitors to precede him.

This they did, to find a company of soldiers drawn up about four gayly caparisoned litters. Their uniform was like that of their commanding officer except the scarlet trimmings, while each bore a spear and shield of some burnished metal. As their captain appeared, they raised and grounded their lances with a precision that spoke well for their drilling, and at the word of command wheeled into line—half before and half behind the litters—as though accustomed to such a service.

Then the guests were assigned each to his carriage in probably what was regarded as the order of their rank; Professor Barton first, Mr. Todd next, Rod third, and Todd last. Four half nude carriers raised each litter at a motion from the officer; a final order was given, and the whole squad started at a double-quick pace down the road toward the great white city.

CHAPTER IX.

AT CHOCHIMA.

RAPIDLY as the troopers travelled, it did not prevent the occupants of the litters from obtaining a very good view of the country through which they were passing. From the hamlet the highway, smooth as a floor, and so clean as to suggest that it had been swept that morning, ran down a gentle slope to a sparkling brook, thence along its right bank toward a large town, glimpses of which could occasionally be caught over the heads of the advance guards.

At the point where the highway touched the stream another road, as smoothly paved, but not over ten feet wide, came in from the north, and, spanning the brook by a stone bridge, swept on as far as the eye could see toward the southern border of the plateau. It was the first of several such roads which crossed the great highway at right angles. There was a second, at what seemed to the travellers to be

a distance of about a mile — though later it was found that these cross-roads were built at a uniform distance from each other of four thousand feet throughout the entire country.

Along each cross-road, both to the right and left, collections of the low, red sandstone houses were frequently seen, sometimes as small as the hamlet just left, at other times much larger, while occasionally there were indications of a good-sized town. The great road itself was not without its villages also, and the castaways were soon convinced that the whole plateau

was densely populated.

The surface of the land on either side, though, as already noted, sloping steadily toward the central basin, was not smooth and unbroken. Here and there little hills and valleys appeared, presenting a diversity of scenery pleasing to the eye. The sections between the cross-roads were, however, divided into farms so nearly of the same size and shape as to cause one to marvel at the exactness; while a similar sameness in the rotation of the grain fields, the vegetable patches, and the fruit orchards, soon tired the beholder with its monotony.

"It looks as though each one of these natives has the same-sized farm, and raises the same amount of the same crops," Rod called back to Todd after a while.

"Yes," he responded, "and exactly the same number of animals, and fowls, and — children."

Possibly the last word was added because at that moment they were passing through a hamlet, and in the doorway of nearly every house the same number of children, though of different ages, were to be seen—a circumstance respecting the native families which soon impressed itself upon the professor and Mr. Todd as well as the lads, but which they were unable to account for until a long time after.

In a half hour the road crossed over a large brook, near its juncture with the stream which had been for some time in sight on their left, and there, just before them, was a large town, containing certainly several thousand inhabitants.

Pointing toward this, Professor Barton looked inquiringly at one of his carriers, indicating he would like to know its name. His desire was evidently understood, for the native immediately replied, "Chochima!"

Across street after street, thickly lined with low, one-story houses, the highway ran for

nearly a half mile, and then emerged into a market-place at least six hundred feet square. A dozen other avenues also came into this from the different parts of the city, while the spaces between them were filled with booths in which all kinds of wares were displayed.

But the greater portion of the square was shut off by a massive stone wall so high as to resemble a fortification. Above this rose the tops of several two-story buildings—the first

the travellers had yet seen.

They had just time enough to note these facts when two heavy metal gates in the wall, directly opposite the termination of the great road, suddenly flew open and a large body of soldiers came forth. At the word of command this squad divided, and formed two solid lines, perhaps twenty feet apart, across the market-place—keeping back the hundreds of natives who were rushing forward to see the strangers. Between these columns of soldiery the litters were borne into the walled enclosure, the troopers followed, the gates were swung quickly to, and then the carriers halted.

In a moment the captain of the escorting party was beside his guests, motioning for them to alight. When they had done so, the bearers picked up the empty litters, and hurried away, while the entire body of troops as quickly marched toward a long row of low buildings built closely up against the south wall of the enclosure, evidently the barracks.

Left alone with the officer, the castaways looked with much interest about them. Directly in front, and at the very centre of the walled square, was a huge stone structure, twenty-five feet high and one hundred feet deep. It was, however, perfectly plain, with the exception of a single ornamentation—an immense golden image of the sun above its spacious portals—and which proclaimed it to be a temple of the shining orb.

At the right, but in the extreme corner of the square, was another stone building, as high as the temple, but not over half its size, and the flags flying from each corner of its flat roof announced its possible character—the official residence of the curaca or governor of the town.

Beyond the temple, and in the extreme north-western corner of the enclosed space, was a third building, about the size and shape of the governor's abode, but its cold sombre walls, unrelieved by ornaments, and unadorned by flags, could suggest but one possible use—a prison house for those who dared to break the laws of the land.

Broad stone walks, spotlessly clean, led from the gates to all of these buildings, while the grounds between resembled a well-kept park, being adorned with fountains and pools, with shade trees and shrubs and flowers.

"I wonder how long they are going to keep us standing here in this hot sun?" Todd now asked petulantly. "I had rather lie down under those trees, or sit by one of those fountains."

Before either of his comrades could reply, a man dressed in flowing yellow robes, with a scarlet image of the sun on the breast, appeared on the roof of the temple. He carried a rod of gold in one hand and a horn of gold in the other. Stepping close to the edge of the building he placed his rod in the socket, apparently arranged for it, and which held it in an exact perpendicular. Then with the horn raised to his lips he waited, his eyes fastened upon his rod. Two or three minutes passed, and then he blew a few soft notes that floated out over the square like a gentle benediction.

"The sun has touched the meridian, and he has proclaimed the fact!" exclaimed the professor, who had been intently watching every movement of the priest. "If I mistake not, it is for this we have been waiting."

As he spoke a sound of chanting voices

floated out from the temple itself. Nearer and nearer the singing came, until through the doorway an imposing procession appeared.

At its head was a company of men whose uniforms were similar to that worn by the officer in charge of the visitors. Some were precisely the same; others were trimmed with narrower bands of scarlet; while a few were so embroidered with red as to almost hide the blue. It was easy to surmise that the wearers were army officials of different ranks.

Behind these came two men, walking side by side, whose dress at once riveted the attention of the watching aeronauts. One of them wore a scarlet uniform elaborately trimmed with gold, while the emblems of the sun on his breast and helmet glittered and sparkled with stones of various hues. The other was dressed in the flowing yellow robes of the priesthood, but the scarlet image of the sun on his bosom had at its centre a single stone, that flashed with the brilliancy of the diamond, while in the red turban or mitre which he wore was another gem of equal size and lustre.

"The head curaca and priest!" exclaimed the professor under his breath, as he saw them, and making, as it afterward proved, a good guess. They were the chief officials of Chochima.

Following the two ranking officials of Church and State were a half dozen persons robed exactly like the man on the roof of the temple, and doubtless, like him, members of the priest-hood.

Then came the chanters—a score of maidens dressed in white robes emblazoned with a golden sun, their heads bare, their long, dark hair streaming down over their shoulders, their hands swinging golden cups of incense whose perfume filled the air.

Slowly the gorgeous train descended the stone steps of the sacred building, and advanced toward the strangers.

"They are coming to greet us," Professor Barton announced. "Draw up here beside me, and act as though you expected their homage. It seems the wisest course to pursue."

In line with the native official who attended them, the four castaways took their stand, and awaited the procession with all the dignity they could assume.

It was not long waiting. In two or three minutes the head officials were within a few yards of the visitors, where, at a word of command from the gorgeously decked curaca, they suddenly halted. Then the chanting of the

maidens ceased, and an impressive silence of perhaps five minutes followed, though it may not have been as long as it seemed.

Were they waiting for some movement of their guests? What was the proper thing to do? How could the prestige they had already apparently gained over the natives be maintained? A single act now might gain or lose forever the good will of the Indians.

These were the thoughts of Professor Barton, and he knew his companions would depend on him to decide on the right thing to be done. He looked first at the company before him, but their passive faces, gazing steadily into his own, told him nothing. Then he glanced at the native by his side. That official stood as erect and motionless as his brother officers opposite him, but there was a look upon his face which the keen-sighted aeronaut quickly interpreted. The man was expecting some movement from the other party, and would not act until it came.

With this conviction another flashed into the professor's mind. The present silence on the part of the natives was designed to be a crucial test of himself and comrades. If they should speak first, their prestige over the Indians would be lost; if, however, they forced the natives to break the silence, it would be an admission on their part that the strangers had a right to their homage. He determined, therefore, to act in accordance with this conviction, and, motioning his companions to follow his example, he deliberately folded his arms across his breast, drew himself to his full height, and

gazed sternly at the waiting company.

There was no possibility of misunderstanding the attitude he had assumed, and it brought an immediate action on the part of the Indians. Priest and curaca looked at each other a moment, and then the latter spoke a single word. Down went the officials in front until their foreheads touched the pavement, then they arose and divided into two ranks, leaving an open path through which the representatives of Church and State quickly came.

If the officer attending the visitors had been impassive during the homage of his comrades, he was not so now. Advancing a few paces in front of those over whom he was keeping charge, he bowed low before the approaching dignitaries, and then stepped quickly to one side, leaving them face to face with the strangers.

There was a moment's hesitation only, then priest and chief bent low down before the aeronauts. As they did so every attending official,

of temple or army, followed their example, while the chorus of virgins swung high their cups of incense, and began a low, sweet chant that sounded like the ripple of running waters.

After a while this singing died slowly away, and the priest, lifting his hands as though a suppliant, began an address full of passionate eloquence, pointing often toward the great shining orb over his head, and then toward the temple.

When he had finished Professor Barton stepped in front of his companions, and began a reply into which he tried to throw as much earnestness and feeling. He told of the great country from which he and his comrades came, of their perilous journey through the air, of their providential landing on the great eastern cliffs, of their hospitable reception at the shepherd's hamlet, and closed with a hearty acceptance of the hospitality of Chochima for himself and friends. As far as possible he, during this speech, made gesture and action interpret his words, and was apparently understood in the expression of his willingness to accept of the hospitality of the city. For the curaca and priest bowed again courteously, and turning about, started back toward the temple.

The prostrate attendants arose, and stood in divided column until the great officials and their

guests had passed, and then closed in behind them. The maidens of the sun, however, whirled around where they were and led the procession back toward the sacred building

with songs of gladness.

Once within the vestibule the train divided, the virgins disappearing behind a mass of white curtains, richly embroidered with gold, on the left, while the priest and chieftain led the way under some heavy yellow curtains, elaborately trimmed with scarlet, at the right, and up a broad stairway into a long corridor, off from which there were a score or more of doorways hung with gold and scarlet portières.

Before one of these doors, at the extreme western end of the corridor, the two dignitaries finally paused, and motioned their guests to enter. As they did so their attendants bowed to the floor, and remained in that attitude of homage until the curtains had dropped back into place. Then their sandalled feet could be

heard returning down the long gallery.

With a constantly growing astonishment the four aeronauts now examined their new quarters. They were in a room at least twenty feet square, whose stone floor was hidden beneath thick woollen rugs of gold and red, and whose walls were hung with a tapestry of exquisite

workmanship. Lounges richly decorated, small, low tables handsomely inlaid with silver and gold, and benches beautifully carved, were scattered about the chamber, while between the two narrow windows, or openings, on the west was a large oval mirror of some polished metal that reflected the gorgeous furnishings of the apartment with a clearness and faithfulness of outline that made it seem a counterpart of the room in which they were standing.

Two doorways opened out from the north and south walls, and glancing through these in turn, the castaways found one a bedroom furnished with four luxurious couches, and the other a lavatory fitted up with towels and basins, and a stone tank through which a stream of

water was constantly running.

"My, isn't this fine!" Todd exclaimed enthusiastically. "I can stand this sort of treatment some time."

"You ought," Rod retorted sententiously. Then he drew a bench up under one of the windows, and mounted it, declaring, "I'm going to see what is outside."

A moment later he announced:—

"There's a park below like that on the east side of the temple, and a walk leading down to two gates like those we entered. Beyond these the great road begins again, and runs toward that white city we saw surrounded by a lake. I can see the tops of some of its buildings quite plainly, and it can't be over eight or ten miles away."

The professor got up at the other window, and looked intently off toward the town for some minutes. Then he said: "Without doubt that is the capital, and to it we shall soon be summoned. But how can anything there rival the splendor and luxury we see here? These floor rugs would bring fabulous prices in New York; that wall tapestry would sell for a small fortune; while those tables and benches would awaken the envy of the finest carvers in our land. It is wonderful, wonderful! I must make a careful drawing of all these things, for without it, no description I may give at home will be believed."

Mr. Todd, with the interest of a manufacturer, and the lads with a desire to make themselves useful, volunteered their assistance, and the four friends were busily engaged with their measurements and draftings, until the soft, mellow sound of a horn announced that the hour of the sun's setting had come.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE WATERS OF THE LAKE.

There was a moment's hush; then the sound of many feet hurrying toward the sacred building floated through the windows. The two lads quickly leaped upon the benches, which were still under the narrow openings, and after a glance outside, cried simultaneously:—

"The gates are wide open, and a great crowd is pouring into the enclosure from the marketplace. There come the soldiers, too, and all are entering the temple. It must be the time for

the evening service."

As though to confirm their words, the low hum of chanting voices now came in from the long corridor, followed by the faint sounds of a multitude.

"I wonder they have not sent for us," the manufacturer remarked in a minute or two.

"Until we understand the language and ways of the people, we must not be surprised at anything that happens," the professor commented. "I am of the opinion, however, that the authorities here at Chochima only have instructions to receive us courteously and await further orders from the capital. If so, they will merely treat us as distinguished guests, providing for our actual wants, nothing more."

"I wish they would hurry up and provide for our stomachs, then," Todd remarked so ruefully as to cause his companions to laugh. "Mine is nearly empty, notwithstanding the big breakfast

I ate."

"We shall have food when this service is over," Rod announced confidently. "The ancient Peruvians, if I remember correctly, had but two meals a day — one just after sunrise, and the other just after sunset."

"That is true," Professor Barton promptly assented; "and we shall be fed presently."

He and the lad were right. Scarcely had the throng left the building when several men, in the garb of servants, entered the apartment bearing trays on which were roast fowl, baked fish, boiled vegetables, fresh fruit, and cool drinks of several kinds. With dexterous hands they covered four of the low tables with spotlessly clean cloths of fine cotton, arranged the tempting viands upon them, and with the usual sign of homage, withdrew to the corridor.

There was but one drawback to that supper—it was the thought of their distant homes, and of the loving inmates there whose hearts were filled with anxiety for them. No one had alluded to the far-away friends, yet each one as he ate was thinking of them; and Mr. Todd at length voiced the feelings of all when he said, with an audible sigh:—

"If I could send a message to the States tonight, lads, I should thoroughly enjoy this meal. These priests know what good living is, and there are some good cooks in Chochima."

"I agree with you, sir," Professor Barton responded with a tremor in his tone he could not entirely conceal. "Were our dear ones aware of our situation, I should not mind a few months among these people. They are certainly providing well for us. But as it is, we must get back to the haunts of civilization as quickly as possible. Let this ever be the first thought with us."

"I imagine there will be but one opinion on that point, professor," Rod answered dryly. "I think we shall have more trouble over the way of carrying it out;" and for some time after the tables had been cleared by the waiting attendants, the four castaways sat there discussing the probabilities of their escape from the

plateau. No certain plan, however, could be decided upon until they obtained a better knowledge of their surroundings, and they finally dismissed the matter for the time, and sought their couches. The contrast between their beds of the previous night and their present accommodations appealed forcibly to all, and with intense satisfaction they stretched themselves upon the soft cushions and fell asleep.

They were awakened at light by an under priest who indicated by signs that they were to dress and follow him. This they quickly did, and were led out into the east park, where a vast assembly had gathered. Places were assigned them on the top steps of the sacred edifice, near the chief priest and his attendants.

For a few minutes they stood there in silence; then the sun slowly peeped above the edge of the little plateau on the great cliff, and sent its rays flashing down the great road until they touched the golden representative of the shining orb above the portals of the temple. Quickly the mellow tones of a horn announced this fact from the roof of the building, while a chorus of maidens on its lower steps broke into a chant of praise. As this ceased the head priest lifted up his arms, and pronounced an apostrophe to the sun, apparently as beautiful in its diction

as it was unintelligible to four of his hearers. With another song the morning worship ended, and the guests were escorted back to their apartments for breakfast.

Not far from nine o'clock the two chief dignitaries of the city, surrounded by their imposing retinue, again appeared, and conducted the strangers to the west vestibule of the temple, where the four litters with their carriers and guards were in waiting. The gates of the enclosure were already open, and a double column of soldiers formed across the market-place to the great road. As soon as the travellers had taken their seats their journey, in precisely the same order as on the previous day, was resumed.

The route still led along the right bank of the river, swollen now to considerable size by the inpouring of the stream from the north, and through a region not unlike that of the day before, save in two particulars: it was more thoroughly cultivated and more thickly settled.

At a village halfway between Chochima and the lake the carriers were changed; and in a trifle over an hour the sparkling sheet of water was reached. Beside a stone pier built well out from the shore a beautiful barge, covered with a blue and scarlet awning, and flying flags of scarlet with a golden sun at the centre, was lying.

Twelve robust men in tunics and turbans of blue were at the oars, while an officer, heavily decked with scarlet and gold, was in charge.

As the litters came down upon the wharf this official stepped quickly forward and received the occupants with the same marked deference that every native had so far shown. Motioning them to take seats in his boat, he promptly followed them, and gave the signal to cast off. The next minute the stout craft swung clear of the dock, her stalwart crew bent their backs to the oars, and she headed for the island city, less than a mile away.

The scene now before the travellers was one of entrancing beauty. The lake itself, sparkling under the sunlight, seemed a transparent gem, while its shores, studded with fields and orchards and villages, furnished a fit setting of emeralds and garnets.

But the marvel of the view was the city at the centre of the lake, rising like a cameo from its silver bosom. It covered the whole island, an exact circle in shape, with a diameter of perhaps two miles. About its water front ran a continuous pier of solid masonry, ten feet higher than the level of the lake. From this circle of stone, like the spokes of a wheel running from its rim to its hub, wide streets gradually ascended to the apex of the hill at the island's centre; while at the regular distance of five hundred feet, twelve great boulevards, resembling a stack of rings of constantly dimin-

ishing size, encircled the city.

Facing the circular wharf, which was nearly one hundred feet deep, were the trading booths of the town. Back of these, and filling up the sections between the lower streets, were low, one-story houses, evidently the homes of the humbler classes. As you ascended the hill, however, the dwellings grew more and more pretentious, until those opposite the park on the island's summit became veritable palaces. But every building, great or small, was of the same glistening color, and surrounded by a yard of more or less ample proportions, filled fortunately with shade or fruit trees, whose dark green foliage broke into and relieved the monotony of the city's spotless hue.

The most remarkable feature of the island town, however, was the temple standing on the apex of its white hill. This was the most imposing building the lads had ever seen. Situated in the large park where all the avenues of the city centred, its four great portals were opposite the four leading thoroughfares of the city, while its massive walls, adorned with columns, arose high in air, the whole being crowned by a majestic bell-shaped dome of gold, which glittered and flashed in the morning light like a second sun. The longer the observers gazed upon this sacred structure the clearer their conviction became that it and the surrounding metropolis were designed to symbolize the blazing orb sending out its rays to every quarter of the earth.

Recalling now his success in ascertaining the name of Chochima, Professor Barton touched the sleeve of the officer, and pointed toward the white city with an inquiring gaze.

A look of surprise passed over the face of the official, immediately followed by what may have been a glance of suspicion or distrust at his interrogator. Then he hid his face in his hands and murmured almost inaudibly,—

"Pachacamac!"

"It is some sacred word," the professor said in a low tone to his comrades; "and we may be sure the place before us is regarded by the natives as holy, and especially dedicated to some god—perhaps it is the City of the Sun. But look there!"

There was no need for his companions to

ask what had called forth that exclamation. As soon as he they also had detected the danger threatening a light craft just ahead of them, propelled by two maidens, whose dress of blue, elaborately trimmed with scarlet, proclaimed them to be of high rank. But it is necessary to go back a little to explain how it happened.

Ever since they began their passage across the lake scores of boats of all classes, from the light and beautifully decorated shell of the pleasure-seeker to the rude and clumsy scow with its half-naked fishermen, had been hovering near them, their occupants vieing with one another to obtain sight of the strange visitors. Among the number were two that had again and again crossed the bow of the great barge. One was the light craft already alluded to, the other was a heavier boat, pulled by four liveried oarsmen, and controlled by a man in the garb of an official.

At the moment of the professor's exclamation these two craft, in their efforts to keep out of the way of the barge, had run so dangerously near each other, that a collision seemed imminent. Possibly had the maidens rowed steadily on no accident would have occurred, but, frightened at the threatening danger, they

gave a sudden scream and dropped their oars. The delay caused by their act made the disaster inevitable. With tremendous force the larger boat struck the smaller one, cutting it in two, and precipitating the fair occupants into the water of the lake.

Rod and Todd sprang to their feet expecting to see a dozen natives hasten to the rescue of the unfortunate girls. But though every boat, including their own, promptly stopped its course, no one made an effort to save the maidens. Not until later did the indignant lads understand that this seeming cowardice on the part of the Indians was really due to the strictness of their social customs. Both young women happened to be of higher rank than any of the men about them, and not one dared to touch them, even to save them from drowning.

No such etiquette, however, bound the watching youths, and in another instant, throwing off their coats, they plunged fearlessly overboard, and swam rapidly toward the helpless girls. Reaching them as they came to the surface of the water for the last time, and at a moment when they were completely exhausted by their own struggles, the brave boys found it an easy task, each selecting a

maiden, to throw one arm about her unresisting form, and with the other to swim back to the waiting boat.

Mr. Todd and the professor drew the still conscious girls into the barge, where the lads followed without assistance; then, at a sign from the officer, the oarsmen resumed their course. But that heroic act of the young strangers, unknown to themselves, had sown the seed for a bitter feud; one that would rally warm friends about them, and arraign bitter foes against them; one that would lead them through many a strange adventure before they left the mountain plateau.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERIOUS FIRE.

The occupants of the surrounding boats were not the only ones who witnessed the manly rescue of the unfortunate maidens. The accident had occurred near enough to the city to be in plain view of the throng upon the dock.

A moment before the collision took place, also, a regiment of soldiers, formed into a hollow square, had come hurriedly down the nearest street, and halted upon the quay at a point directly opposite the state barge. Then the ranks had parted, and a litter was borne out from the centre of the troops in which sat a man whose uniform rivalled in its decorations of gems and scarlet and gold that of the curaca of Chochima.

This dignitary was just in time to see the frail craft of the young women cut in two by the larger boat, and in his excitement he leaped from his stretcher without waiting for his carriers to lower it, and ran down the nearest steps to

the water's edge. For an instant it looked as though the official was going to plunge into the lake to the aid of the drowning girls, though they must have sunk for the last time long before he could have reached them. But evidently the prompt action of the young strangers prevented this movement, and the curaca stopped where he was, watching the whole scene with a lively interest. When the maidens were safe in the barge, he, without leaving the steps, turned toward his troopers, and lifted his hand. Instantly they raised their spears and broke into loud huzzas.

As the cheers came across the water a look of intense relief passed over the face of the captain of the barge. Ever since the rescued girls were placed in his boat, he had appeared anxious and troubled; but reassured now by the shouts of the soldiers in which the assembled people were also joining, he spoke a few words to his rowers, and they, quickening their stroke, soon dashed up to the landing where the head chief was still standing.

The next minute, ignoring the strangers and also the humble salutations of the barge officer, the waiting curaca sprang on board, and caught one of the maidens to his bosom. Her arms encircled his neck, her face was laid close to

his, and as they clung convulsively one to the other, no one could mistake their relationship—they were father and child.

Soon, however, the man seemed to realize that he was neglecting a duty, for releasing his daughter from his grasp, he first took the hand of the other maiden, and spoke a few words apparently of congratulation at her escape; then he turned to the visitors, and gazing at them for an instant with a face eloquent in its expression of gratitude and good-will, he dropped low before them in homage. Nor was this, in his judgment, enough to show the obligation he felt, for catching up one of the cushions of the boat he laid it upon his shoulder—an act that the beholders afterward learned meant he was their servant forever.

As the man arose, Professor Barton put out his hand saying pleasantly, though he knew he would not be understood:—

"We are glad to have your friendship, sir; but as to those maidens — why, these youngsters could no more let them drown than they can stop breathing. They are a regular life-saving station, on land or sea, as I happen to know. If they didn't have a chance to save some one every few months, their life wouldn't be worth living."

The native understood the cordiality of the speaker, if nothing more, and placed his own hand in that of the professor. Then Mr. Todd and the lads in turn stepped forward to give him a hearty hand grasp; and a friendship was there begun which through the long weeks that followed was never broken. By a gesture the curaca now indicated he would care for the young ladies first, and immediately conducted them to his own litter. Placing them in this, he detailed a small squad of soldiers as a screen from the gazing people, and sent them off up the hill. Then returning to the barge, he escorted his new friends to the four litters brought for their use. Barely were they seated when a fifth litter for himself, quickly fetched from some neighboring storehouse, appeared. Stepping into it he gave the word of command, and his regiment, forming into a square about the stretchers, started up the nearest avenue.

Hidden behind the soldiers there was little chance for the travellers to notice their surroundings even if there had been the time for it. But the journey was both a short and rapid one. Emerging a few minutes later into the central park at the summit of the island, they stopped before a great palace on the right. Quickly the troopers were ordered into two

columns, between which the litters were borne to the door of the building. There alighting, the curaca himself led the way down a broad hall and out into a spacious court adorned with fountains and shrubs and flowers. On the benches beautifully inlaid with silver, standing beside two wide-spreading trees and near an artificial pool in which fishes of red and gold were playing, he left them.

"I say, Rod, this beats anything we have seen yet!" Todd exclaimed enthusiastically; "and if the inside of the house compares with the outside, we shall find our apartments away ahead of those we had at Chochima. I wonder if this is to be our quarters while we are in town? If so, I wish they'd hurry up and show us to our rooms."

"Always in a hurry, Todd," his cousin responded with a laugh. "In a hurry for supper, and in a hurry for bed; in a hurry for your room, and in a hurry for what next!"

"But these wet clothes are mighty uncomfortable," he expostulated, "and I'd like to change

them or dry them."

Rod had no time to reply, for a man now approached, and with a low bow motioned them to follow him. He was evidently some household functionary, for he led them across the court and

up a flight of stairs to the next story; thence down a corridor to the front of the palace, where he drew back a gorgeous portière, and waited for them to enter.

The chamber was larger than that they had occupied at Chochima, and more handsomely furnished, but in other respects greatly resembled it. There was also a similar arrangement of bed and bathrooms.

Into the latter the lads immediately went, and removing their wet garments, wrung them out, one by one, until they were as dry as they could get them.

"I wonder if there is a laundry or kitchen, where we can hang these things?" Rod remarked when their task was done.

"What shall we do while they are drying?" asked Todd.

"Lie in bed, I presume," his comrade retorted laughingly.

"No," the voice of Mr Todd interrupted from the big chamber, "here comes a servant with clothing."

There were four servants instead of one, however, under the charge of the same household official who had shown the castaways to their apartments a few moments before, and each one bore a complete native outfit. When

these had been deposited in the bedroom, the valet took Mr. Barton by the arm and led him to one of the windows overlooking the park. Pointing first at the clothing and then at the temple nearly opposite, he indicated that the professor and his comrades were to dress as soon as possible and then visit the shrine. By further gestures he also made known that he would assist them in putting on the new and untried garments.

The lads were delighted at this opportunity to assume the native costume, but Mr. Todd objected, saying with a shrug of his shoulders,—

"I shall look like a clown in that rig; the

clothes I wear are good enough for me."

But Professor Barton took quite another view of the matter. He said:—

"I think it wiser, sir, to yield to this request. The curaca would not make it unless it were best; then, too, the boys have nothing else to wear, and it might seem a strange thing to the natives that two of our party have adopted their dress while the others refuse to put it on. We must hasten also, for it is nearly noon, and I presume we are expected to attend the meridian service as we did at Chochima."

The manufacturer therefore yielded, and in

a short time he and his companions were robed in vestures of divers colors. Their outer garments were of white material, as soft and fine as silk, ornamented with a sun of pure gold; their tunics were red and bound at the waist with a sash of blue; their leggings and sandals were of gold; their turbans were of the hues of the rainbow, bound with a wide scarlet fringe and adorned with two bright feathers; while in the sash and breast were solitaire diamonds of huge size and dazzling brilliancy.

"My, how fine we are!" exclaimed the irrepressible Todd, as soon as he was arrayed in his gorgeous costume, and dancing about the apartment. "This is the gayest rig I've seen

yet. But what's the matter, professor?"

The question was called forth by the sober face of Mr. Barton, as he took up his brilliant turban.

"This is the head-piece of the princes of the royal blood," he remarked gravely; "and as yet we have seen no one wearing it. I wonder what it means that it has been assigned to us?"

"That we are already regarded as the children of the sun," Rod asserted confidently. "The curaca here would hardly dare to send them to us without orders, and who could give those orders but the ruler of the land himself?

Maybe after our visit to the temple, we are to be taken to the royal palace, and so have been dressed for the occasion."

"Possibly," the professor admitted; "but see! our valet is beckoning for us to follow him. Come on!"

They were led back to the court, where they found the curaca of the city, another chieftain dressed very much like the curaca of Chochima, a young lad in the dress of a courier, two women, and the two rescued girls, awaiting them. As the guests approached, wearing the garments furnished them, the whole waiting party bowed low before them, and with a quick movement placed tiny bags of grain upon their shoulders.

The gravity upon Professor Barton's face deepened as he witnessed their act; there could be no question but that their host and his friends were pledging their fealty to him and his comrades, and he did not know just how to receive it. Acting solely from impulse, he stepped forward, and raised the small sacks from the shoulders of the prostrate natives, at the same time motioning them to stand upon their feet. They obeyed, their faces diffused with unmistakable joy. His impulsive movement had evidently delighted their hearts.

But the great chief was not done. Calling one of the women and one of the girls to his side, he drew himself up proudly, and began an address, in which only one thing was intelligible to his listeners: he was Chasca, the curaca of Pachacamac, and the ladies were his wife and daughter.

When he was done, the other chieftain came forward with the other members of the little party, and in a similar speech declared himself to be Tupac, the curaca of Zoctlan — a town the castaways were destined to know more about later — and that his companions were his wife

and son and daughter.

These bits of information were received by the guests with many pleasant nods; then while the older members of the group stood quietly by the fountain waiting for the summons to the temple, the young people mingled freely together, trying, though not without many amusing blunders, to converse with each other. There had been time enough for Rod and Todd to tell their own names, and learn that the youth was called Admaxla, his sister Ica, and the other maiden Tara, when an army official approached, and with the usual obeisance to the curaca, announced that the time for the religious service had come.

Chasca immediately stepped to the left side of the professor, Tupac took a similar position beside Mr. Todd, while Admaxla acted as escort for the two lads, and leaving the ladies in the court, they in this order went out into the park.

Between two ranks of soldiers, who stood with bowed heads and uplifted spears, they passed to the vestibule of the largest temple on earth, where they were met by a deputation of under priests and singers. A look of astonishment swept over the faces of the priestly throng as they beheld the strangers; then, as one man, they touched their foreheads to the floor in reverent homage. Quickly rising, they led the way into the great audience chamber, followed by army and multitude, until thousands stood within those spacious walls.

Down the slanting floor to the very centre of the building the visitors were escorted, where, encircled by a railing of gold, was an immense altar. On this lay the wood and the sacrifice, arranged so there was a small opening in the midst of the pile, while many feet above towered the bell roof of the structure, its extreme top fitted with some transparent substance, hidden behind curtains of scarlet, through which the sunlight softly entered.

Before the altar, all alone, stood a man, whose white robe, bordered with yellow and red and blue, and white mitre, surrounded with a blue band, and crowned with an image of the sun formed of sparkling gems, were not necessary to declare his office. The pose of the man, his haughty air, his stern countenance, proclaimed him, as he really was, the high priest of the nation.

His eyes were fastened on the sacrificial pile as the chanting maidens led the strangers down the temple floor, and it was not until they stood before the rail that he turned and looked at them. It was an insolent stare he gave; then his face grew dark with perceptible anger. For a moment, however, he seemed about to speak, or to perform some act of homage, then he checked himself, and faced the altar again without giving the visitors a greeting of any kind—a movement that filled the audience with a surprise they could not wholly suppress.

If the priest heard the murmur of the throng he gave no signs of it, but kept his eyes fixed upon the sacrifice, until the note of a horn from the roof of the building announced that the sun was at its meridian. Then he lifted his hands over the altar, uttered a few words of prayer, and paused with the air of one who was expecting some demonstration.

It came an instant later in a way that awoke the shouts of the multitude: the scarlet curtains at the top of the great shaft parted, and a ray of the sun, so bright as to dazzle the beholders, swept down, striking the sacrificial pile at its hollow centre and kindling it into a sudden blaze.

CHAPTER XII.

PROFESSOR BARTON SCORES ONE.

As that brilliant ray flashed down from the dome and kindled the offering upon the altar, all the vast throng fell prostrate with loud acclamations to the sun god. It was clear that they regarded the mysterious fire as a direct gift from heaven, and awed by this exhibition of divine favor, they bowed in humble and reverent praise. There was, therefore, a triumphant smile on the lips of the high priest as he turned to witness the effect of the demonstration upon his guests. He found them standing erect, with folded arms and slightly amused faces, and instantly his own look changed to one of hatred mingled with fear. He could see that his great coup held no wonder for the strangers, and with ill-concealed chagrin he now abruptly dismissed the waiting congregation with his blessing.

Had the ecclesiastic been a trifle quicker, his feelings toward the castaways might have been different. For the sudden flash of light and resultant flame were unintelligible to all except Professor Barton, and for an instant the others had gazed wonderingly at the burning pile. But the aeronaut, whose quick eye had detected a sudden pressure of the priest's foot upon a slab in front of the altar, at once divined the cause of the seeming miracle; and turning to his companions, he by a gesture so slight as to pass unnoticed by all but them, indicated that they were to imitate him. Hence, when the high priest turned, he found them all smiling serenely.

As the last of the audience passed from the sacred room, the dignitary, without deigning to notice again the visitors, motioned to one of his waiting attendants. He immediately advanced, and, bowing low before the professor, signified that he and his associates were to follow. Somewhat disconcerted by this unexpected move, Mr. Barton looked toward Chasca, hoping to receive some explanation from him. It came in a way perfectly reassuring, for the curaca, with a bright smile and emphatic nod, motioned him to go with the under priest.

Following their guide out into the vestibule, the little party was led up a broad flight of stairs and a few steps along the corridor at their head. Then, holding aside the curtain which was before the nearest door, the attendant, waiting only for them to enter, left them.

The room in which they now found themselves was similar in every respect to that which they had occupied while the guests of the curaca across the park. There was one noticeable feature about it, however. The windows—there were two, narrow, and without glass or any substitute for it—faced the east. This fact Rod discovered immediately, having mounted a bench to look out. From them there was a view of the city, the lake, and the great road, stretching away to the little plateau on the edge of the cliff, where the castaways had landed.

"Well, professor," Todd inquired, as soon as they had inspected the new quarters, "will you explain to us how that old priest made his fire come down from the roof? I'd like to know."

"Certainly," he answered. "That scarlet curtain across the top of the dome conceals a huge convex lens. It is so arranged that it will centre its rays upon the altar just as the sun reaches the meridian. At a signal from the high priest the curtain is drawn aside for an instant, and the great burning glass sets the sacrificial pile on fire. How the Indians made

a lens of such size, and what means they used to adjust it, I cannot imagine. Probably the secret is known only to the priesthood."

Further conversation was stopped by a voice in the corridor just outside their doorway. Rod stepped forward and drew back the curtain. There stood the man who had served them as valet while in the curaca's palace, smiling and bowing, while behind him were four servants bearing the clothing of the aeronauts. That of Rod and Todd had been nicely dried, and was ready for use, should they so desire. But with the professor's advice they all decided to continue to wear, for the present at least, the native costumes which had been furnished them — a decision that proved to be an eminently wise one, as they themselves were convinced before the day was over.

Not far from the middle of the afternoon an attendant of the temple appeared and signed to the visitors to follow him.

"Maybe they are going to take us to the Inca now," Todd said to his cousin, as they left their apartments.

"Perhaps so," Rod admitted.

But they did not leave the building. Passing down into the vestibule, they crossed it and entered a large room opening off the left side.

Here they found a small but dignified assemblage awaiting them.

At the extreme end of the chamber was a small dais or platform, on which were a couch and small table. Here stood the high priest, clothed in his most magnificent robes, and sparkling with gems of an incalculable value. Before him, in a semicircle, were five benches, on which, clothed in their official garments, very different from those of the priest, but no less gorgeous, sat Chasca, Tupac, the curaca of Chochima, and two other men evidently of equal rank. At the left, under the charge of an officer and a dozen soldiers, were the headsman of the hamlet where the castaways had first been entertained, the boy who had first discovered them, the chasquis or courier who had been sent off with the first news of the strangers, and the three officers who had shared in escorting them to the white city—one as far as Chochima, the second as far as the lake, and the third as captain of the state barge. At the right were four couches, and to these Professor Barton and his friends were led.

As they approached, the five curacas rose, and, together with the other occupants of the room, bowed low and remained in that attitude until they were seated. The priest alone re-

mained standing, and gazed unmoved upon them. When the other officials resumed their places, however, he spoke sharply, apparently calling the council, for such the aeronauts took it to be, to order.

Of course the visitors could understand nothing of what was now said, but from the gestures and looks of the speakers they were able to surmise somewhat as to the import of the speeches.

After a few preliminary remarks the priest called out the village headsman, the village lad, the courier, and the officers who had acted as escorts, and these in turn apparently told all they knew about the coming of the guests. During the testimony of the headsman the rude drawing of Mr. Barton was produced by the priest, and passed around among the curacas, who examined it with much interest. When the witnesses had all testified, they and their guards were sent from the room, leaving only the five chieftains and the ecclesiastic present with the visitors.

As the last attendant disappeared, the high priest, who up to that moment had preserved the decorum of a fair-minded presiding officer, suddenly became transformed. Drawing himself to his full height, he began an address, which, from his tones, his looks, and his gestures, seemed to be a perfect tirade against the strangers. There could be no question but that for some reason unknown to themselves they had awakened the bitter enmity of this high official.

As he closed, Chasca leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing with indignation, and began a speech of passionate earnestness, during which he frequently pointed toward the listening aeronauts, evidently speaking in their favor. In this he was ably supported by Tupac and the curaca of Chochima; but the other two chieftains sided with the high priest, to judge from the approving glances that dignitary bestowed upon them.

After some minutes of animated conversation among themselves, the curacas finally seemed to come to some decision, which Chasca, as spokesman for the others, arose and formally announced. Whatever this agreement was, it clearly did not meet the approval of the presiding officer, for he with very bad grace immediately dissolved the council.

When a moment later an under priest appeared to conduct the aeronauts back to their apartments, Chasca summarily dismissed him

and personally assumed the office of their escort. Before he left the council chamber, however, he spoke a few words to Tupac, who, with an emphatic nod of approval, hurried away.

On arriving at the door of their quarters the curaca indicated by a gesture that he would like to enter them. A hearty permission was promptly accorded him, and he made a thorough inspection of each room, apparently satisfying himself there was no other way of entrance but that which opened into the corridor. Before he had finished his examination Tupac arrived with his son, Admaxla, and the two curacas by signs indicated that it was their wish for the lad to remain constantly with the guests, as a guard and a means of communication with themselves.

Of course a ready consent to this arrangement was given, but when the chiefs had departed, Mr. Todd anxiously inquired:—

"Professor, what does this mean? Have

you any idea?"

"I certainly have an idea," he replied slowly, "but I cannot vouch for its correctness. I should judge from what we have just witnessed that the chief priest is for some reason violently opposed to our present treatment, but

that he is overruled by our friends. It is clear also that there is no Inca in this country, but that it is governed by a federation of curacas, over whom the high priest has some power. It is not absolute, however, and thanks to the intervention of Chasca, Tupac, and the curaca of Chochima, we are on probation, and will doubtless remain so until we can speak their language, when a fuller inquiry concerning us will be made."

"Do you think we are safe in the meantime?" the manufacturer asked.

"That I do not know," Mr. Barton responded.

"The fact that the curacas have placed Admaxla here looks as though they were not sure of the intentions of the chief priest, and propose to be on their guard against him. We must be on the alert also. It might be a good plan to devise some means of winning the old ecclesiastic to our friendship, either by inspiring his awe, or convincing him we have powers he does not possess."

"I have just the idea for that," Rod exclaimed excitedly. "Come here a moment, professor, I want to talk it over with you," and he led the

way to the bedroom.

What that plan was the others were not informed. Indeed, the only inkling obtained

of it was couched in the words of the aeronaut, as he and Rod returned from their secret council:—

"We will try it to-morrow, anyway. It can

do no harm," he was saying.

An hour or two was now spent by the boys, under Professor Barton's direction, in trying to converse with Admaxla, who entered into the teaching with great zest. The two lads made good progress, and soon showed that it would require no lengthy period for them to become sufficiently conversant with the native tongue for ordinary intercourse. The young Indian seemed to have formed a great liking for Rod, and was especially anxious to aid him in his efforts to acquire the new speech.

During supper and in the long evening that followed, the instruction was kept up, and before they went to their beds, Rod was able to make Admaxla understand that he and the professor wished at an early hour in the morning to visit the great bell-shaped roof of the temple. The lad expressed no surprise at this request, and replied that he could show them the way there without trouble. About a half hour before sunrise, therefore, the trio made the desired trip, leaving Todd and his uncle still asleep, returning in a short time with their movements

entirely unnoticed by any of the other occupants of the building.

If the native lad saw anything more in the lofty climb than a mere whim of his new friends, his face in no way expressed it; but Rod showed he was fairly bursting with some secret, while the professor was unusually smiling and complacent.

Just before noon the usual attendant appeared and led the way to the great audience chamber below, where the visitors were assigned the same places as on the previous day. The high priest was already in his position before the altar, and paid no attention to the strangers, as they took their stand outside the railing, although the assembled people bowed reverently to the floor as they passed among them.

As the mellow notes of the horn sounded forth, announcing the noon hour had come again, the ecclesiastic uttered a few words of prayer and raised his hands to invoke the divine fire. The scarlet curtains in the dome parted as on the previous day, but no ray of sunlight shot down the great shaft, the sacrifice still remained unkindled.

A troubled expression passed over the face of the priest, while a silence that could be felt hung over the vast throng. Again he raised his hands, calling aloud upon the sun god, but there was no response.

A soft murmur of surprise, not unlike a great sigh, escaping the multitude, caused the baffled dignitary to turn toward the strangers. He then dropped his hands, and stared with bulging eyes at the professor, who was already inside the rail, and almost at his elbow.

The tall form of the aeronaut was drawn up to its full height; his face was stern and threatening; his right arm was uplifted toward the great dome, while his hand was clenched as though he had just caught the rays of the sun in his grasp. Brushing the priest aside with his left arm, he swept his right hand across the front edge of the altar. Immediately a flame burst forth, seemingly from his fist, which he threw into the centre of the sacrificial pile, kindling it into an instant blaze.

At this wonder the throng fell prostrate upon the floor, taking up the very cry the village headsman and his household had used two days before: "The gods have come down to us! The gods have come down to us!"

Before that great shout even the high priest himself trembled. He knew for him now to refuse to acknowledge that he was in the presence of a superior power would only madden the frenzied populace and weaken his own influence over them. He turned, therefore, though unwillingly, to do homage to the stranger, and was met with the stern command in his own tongue:—

"Down! Down! Do homage!"

The eyes of the speaker flashed terribly: his whole attitude was of one who expected immediate obedience; and the conquered priest, his face expressing abject fear, his hands raised as though a humble suppliant, fell instantly at the aeronaut's feet.

The professor won.

CHAPTER XIII.

ADMAXLA SCORES, TOO.

When at length the vanquished man ventured to lift up his head, he found himself alone before the altar. Rising to his feet, he looked about him with a bewildered air. Professor Barton was standing outside of the railing, near his three associates, calm and dignified. Only the burning sacrifice gave testimony to the reality of the stirring incident in which he had borne the principal part. At loss at first to know what was expected of him, it finally dawned upon the discomfited ecclesiastic that he was to perform his official functions as usual, and with perceptible hesitation he proceeded with the services and dismissed the congregation.

The strangers, escorted only by Admaxla, went out with the throng, and ascended to their apartments. When back in the room, however, Todd, who was greatly excited over the victory the professor had won over the priest, turned to Rod, asking:—

"How was it you prevented that fire from coming down the shaft, chum? Did Professor Barton really catch it in his hand and throw it upon the altar? If so, why did it not burn him? Come now, tell us all about it, for I suppose this is the trick that you suggested should be played on the old priest."

"I think the professor can tell you how we arranged it better than I can," Rod replied

modestly.

"There is really very little to tell," Mr. Barton commenced. "Admaxla showed us how to reach the great dome by a narrow and apparently little-used stairway. At its top Rod and I left him to keep guard, while we climbed up a rude ladder fastened to the inside wall until we came out upon the summit of the bell-shaped roof.

"There is a parapet about the crown, imperceptible from the street, yet wide enough for one to walk about it. Standing on this we studied the mechanism before us with the deepest interest. About the inner wall of the parapet were a half dozen metallic mirrors so arranged as to catch the rays of the sun and throw them upon a convex lens.

"This lens is of immense size, and is cut with a precision and finished with a smooth-

ness and polish that are little short of the marvellous. It is also placed upon a metal framework that can be adjusted at any angle you desire, so that you can focus the rays of the rising, the meridian, or the setting sun upon it. Probably there are times when it is used to kindle the morning and evening as well as the noon sacrifice.

"Below the lens are the scarlet curtains, so fixed that they can be rolled back by cords which run down inside of the walls of the shaft, probably to the front of the altar. By a pressure of his foot upon a slab there the high priest has them under his control, can part them at his will, and so may be the sole possessor of the secret by which the miraculous fire is transmitted to the sacrifice.

"After studying the apparatus awhile, Rod and I were able to throw the lens out of focus for the meridian sun, and so prevent the descent of the usual ray. In my fist I held a match, one of the few I happened to have in my vest pocket; its head was just outside of my clenched fingers, and when I passed my hand along the front of the altar it ignited. Only waiting for it to get into a full blaze, and taking care I was not burned, I threw it into the hollow centre of the sacramental pile, where

it kindled the combustibles already laid by the

wily priest.

"As to the Quichuan words I used, Rod learned them of Admaxla last evening, and practised me in the use of them while on the dome until I had them perfect. So a match, a few native words, a little skilful acting, and the throwing of the great lens out of gear, were the stock in trade with which I met and vanquished the old ecclesiastic—a very simple thing after all."

"That reminds me," Rod now remarked, "I must now go up and throw the lens back into position. The priest may take a notion to investigate his apparatus, and so catch on to

our little trick."

"Let me go with you," Todd exclaimed, as the professor nodded his head in approval of the proposition.

"All right, come on; and you, too, Admaxla," Rod answered, beckoning to the native lad to

join them.

They were gone more than two hours, and on their return had a story to tell which greatly interested the professor and Mr. Todd. Rod was the speaker, and said:—

"We had no difficulty in reaching the top of the narrow stairway unnoticed by any one, and there left Admaxla on guard, as the professor and I had done during the previous trip. Then Todd and I clambered up the dome to its summit, where it was but a moment's work to throw the lens back into its old place. When this was accomplished, I was anxious to descend, so as to make good our escape while the way was clear; for somehow, I could not help feeling that the old priest would visit the tower before a great while. But Todd desired to examine the whole mechanism, and to take a view of the city, and lake, and surrounding country, from the parapet. I humored him till my patience was about exhausted, and then said, 'Well, I'm going whether you do or not, and if you are caught here, you must get out of the scrape as best you can.'

"He laughed, and started to follow me, but before either of us had slipped down through the manhole to the ladder, Admaxla joined us. We could see that he was greatly excited, and between his words and gestures managed to

make out that some one was coming.

"We were puzzled for an instant what to do; but there was not a moment to spare, and for the want of a better place we went down the first ladder a few feet, and, swinging off upon one of the great girders of the roof, crouched close down upon it, trusting to the semi-darkness to conceal our presence.

"Fortunately we had hidden before the new-comer reached the top of the stairway, and lay holding our breath until he passed us and disappeared through the opening out upon the parapet. I raised my head a little as the man left the ladder, and saw that the intruder was, as I already suspected, the high priest himself.

"Whether to remain where we were until he had examined the lens and departed, or to try and descend the ladders before he returned, I was unable to decide. But Admaxla settled the question in a way I had not expected. Springing lightly back upon the steps, he reached up his hand and touched a metal cover I had not noticed before. It was just inside of the manhole, and evidently designed to slip down across it. Waiting until a rattling of the apparatus above by the examining priest deadened the noise, he shoved the metal plate into its place, and, dropping back beside Todd and myself, whispered the one Quichuan word, 'Come.'

"Without a sound we followed him, supposing that it was merely his intention to lead us to the stairway, down which we were to escape. But at the foot of the last ladder but one he touched us, for we could see nothing on account of the darkness, indicating we were to swing ourselves off again upon the nearest girder, and wait for him.

"Wondering what he was up to, we obeyed, while he disappeared down the remaining steps. He was gone, perhaps, five minutes, and we heard the low sound of moving boards; then he came back to us. Again whispering 'Come,' he now led us along the great beam to its darkest point, almost directly opposite the ladder from which we had swung.

"We sat there in the darkness for some time, and I was about to ask him what we were waiting for, when a noise up at the scuttle attracted my attention. Evidently the priest had discovered the closed trap, and was trying to open it.

"I cannot tell you how long it was before he succeeded. It seemed to me it must have been an hour, and not knowing how soon he might accomplish his purpose, we did not dare to stir.

"When at length the cover was shoved back, and the light again streamed down through the dome, I looked below me toward the stairway, and saw what Admaxla had been doing while Todd and I waited for him on the girders. He had opened a great cover in the floor of the dome, through which I caught a glimpse of water. It was the supply tank of the temple.

Then he had moved the foot of the last ladder so that it rested upon the extreme edge of the reservoir. It was a cunningly contrived plan to give the priest a good ducking; and it worked like a charm.

"Apparently believing the manhole had been closed accidentally, the priest dropped his feet through it the moment it was opened, and started down the ladders with his back toward us. When he reached the last one he did not appear to notice its foot was out of place, but went down it rapidly, until within two or three rungs of the bottom, and then, as though impatient with his long stay in the tower, and anxious to get down as quickly as possible, he dropped off.

"The outcome of that backward jump will doubtless always be a mystery to him. Instead of landing upon a solid floor as he expected, he went plunging through a great opening, and

down into the watery depths.

"By the time he struck the inky waves Admaxla had run over to the misplaced ladder, and, quickly swinging it back into place, beckoned for us to join him. We did so, and in another minute were safely down the stairway into the great corridor above this one outside our door, where we again concealed ourselves,

this time behind the portière of the room directly opposite the passageway into the priest's quarters.

"Not until then did it occur to me that the unfortunate man might drown. This was more than I had bargained for when I had given a silent consent to Admaxla's trick, and I hastened by signs to let the boy know what I feared. He shook his head vigorously, and signified by many gestures that there was a way of escape out of the tank.

"He was right, for in a short time we heard our victim coming down the stairway, and when out in the corridor we had a good view of him from our hiding-place. Drenched from head to foot, and evidently scared by the unaccountable mishaps that had befallen him, he fled down the passageway toward his apartments with a rapidity that was certainly astonishing for one so old.

"Admaxla ran up to the dome and closed the tank; then we hurried here, taking good care, however, that no one saw us. I am of the opinion it will be some time before the old ecclesiastic climbs about the tower again."

"It certainly has been an unfortunate day for the poor fellow," Professor Barton remarked, when the laugh that Rod's story had awakened died away; "and you covered your part in the incidents so cleverly I do not see how he can have any other idea than that his misfortunes were due to the displeasure of the gods. We will hope he has learned by this day's experiences to leave us alone, even if he does not seek our friendship."

It was a hope to which all his hearers could give their heartiest assent.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF ANTALCA.

For several weeks it seemed as though Rod's stratagem had achieved its purpose, for the high priest, while not seeking to cultivate a more intimate friendship with his guests, showed them a certain amount of respect, and never failed to give homage when he encountered them in public.

Nor did he in any way interfere with the freedom of their movements. Under Admaxla's guidance all four of the castaways came and went as they chose; and all the while made sure progress in learning the Indian tongue, so that ere long they were able to converse with some readiness in it.

If the ecclesiastic was somewhat inclined to shun the strangers, the curacas were not. Chasca and Tupac were frequent visitors at the rooms set apart for the aeronauts' use, as was also Haulpa, the curaca of Chochima. The friendship between these three men — who, as the

professor had soon found out, were the most influential chieftains in the state — and the cast-

aways soon became fast and strong.

Not only did they frequently visit the temple, but the strangers were often invited to their homes, an invitation which usually extended over three or four days. With Admaxla as their escort, the two lads also made numberless trips about the plateau, becoming familiar with the people and the land.

It was not long before the visitors were sufficiently acquainted with the language to ascertain their exact status in the eyes of the people and the majority of their rulers; and why it was that their permanent abode was fixed at the temple. The assumption of the old village headsman that they were the children of the sun on a visit to the country had generally been accepted, and as such they were regarded not merely as the guests of the nation, but of the priesthood. The sacred edifice was, therefore, looked upon as their proper dwelling-place.

Two other items of information that the aeronauts anxiously sought for were not so easily obtained: whether there was a way down the great cliffs to the plains below; and how these descendants of the ancient Peruvians came to be dwellers on the plateau. Admaxla,

when questioned upon these subjects, only shook his head in answer to the first; while with reference to the latter he always said:—

"Wait till you see my grandfather, Malca. He is keeper of the Quipus, and can tell you,

as no other can, of our history and race."

Further inquiry revealed that Malca, the father of Tupac, curaca of Zoctlan, was by right of inheritance the head of the largest and most fertile district of the plateau, and the keeper of the Songs and Records of the nation. He was now, however, nearly one hundred years old, and a cripple from a sad accident of a few years before; so the active duties of the chieftainship fell upon the son, though the old curaca, with clear intellect and unfailing memory, still attended to the less arduous but perhaps no less important office of poet and historian.

It was with more than ordinary pleasure the castaways made their first visit to Zoctlan. They found it a thriving town of about eight thousand inhabitants, in the centre of the north-western province of the plateau. Their journey there was scarcely less than a continuous ovation, for crowds of peasants lined the great road leading to the city, and greeted the strangers with constant demonstrations of joy—a circumstance due to Tupac himself, who had caused

the heroic rescue of his daughter to be proclaimed in every household under his suzerainty, and so aroused the enthusiasm of the people with whom the maiden was a special favorite.

On their arrival at his palace they were received by his father, Malca, with a courtesy and homage that immediately won their hearts. Bending low in the litter, from which he could not rise without help, for a moment, the aged and crippled curaca then raised his head and began a song which, old as he was, rang forth as clearly and sweetly as the notes of a silver bell.

With the knowledge they already possessed of the Quichuan dialect, and Admaxla's help (for he had made as great progress in their tongue as they had in his) they were able to understand its import. It recounted their visit as the children of the sun to Antalca, the native name for the plateau, their journey to the great lake, their rescue of the maidens, and their sojourn in the holy city. It closed with the prophecy that their coming would be of great blessing to the houses of Chasca and Tupac, the true servants of the sun.

It was not until a later visit, however, that Professor Barton ventured to ask for the history of the land. Reclining on his litter one afternoon in the park surrounding the palace, with the strangers and the entire household of Tupac around him, the old curaca of his own accord had the state Quipus, a bundle of many-colored threads, tied in various knots to assist the memory, brought out. Showing it to his guests he said:—

"Here is the record of Antalca; not a string is broken, not an item of importance is wanting. My fathers were faithful to their trust, and I have not departed from the path in which they walked."

"Will you tell us how your people wandered so far from their native land?" the professor questioned.

A look of startled surprise came into the face of the old man as he answered:—

"You know of our former glory, and how we were driven from it, then? Surely it is a long story, covering many years since that day, sire; but as you ask, I will recount the tale."

"Do, indeed, from the very beginning," was the eager comment of the aeronaut, warmly seconded by his friends. So the aged chieftain began:—

"Many, very many years ago, my people lived, as you seem to know, in a land far to the south and west, bordering on the great

sea, and ruled over by a mighty prince. For long years they dwelt in safety, and peace and prosperity was in every home; but at length there came strange men in great boats with wings, who landed on the coast and started for the sacred city of the Inca."

"Cuzco," interrupted the professor.

"Yes, sire," the Indian assented with a look of awe. "Our ruler went to meet them with his army; but before he left the city he called to him five of his most noble relatives — four of them cousins, and the fifth a half-brother — and said to them:—

"'Alas! I fear misfortune is about to fall upon our beloved country, and dire disaster upon my house. To guard against this as best we can, do you take my son, and three-fourths of all the state treasures — they are already packed for the carrying — and flee with your families and attendants to a place which this man shall show you,' and he led forth a stranger, a wild, savage man, of a dress and hue unfamiliar to the assembled nobles. 'There you are to await my messenger. If he come asking for treasure, you are to give it to him, for it will be to ransom and save our royal lineage; if he reports the departure of the strange boats, you are to return with all your retinue; if he comes with

a message that all is lost, you are to seek out some place in the vast regions to the northeast, and establish another nation, with my son

as ruler over you.'

"The nobles bowed low, and taking the child, for he was but six years old, and the stranger guide, went forth. Hastily collecting their families and servants they, in number about one thousand, set forth for the place the Inca had appointed. A priest, second only to the high priest in rank, accompanied them.

"But when they had come down from the mountains to a great plain and a great river, the wild man, their guide, was bitten by a serpent and died. Nor was he, in the agonies of his death, able to disclose the spot where the nobles were to await the king's messenger.

"In the council that was immediately held, it was decided to make camp where they were and wait for the royal courier, the thought being that he would travel over the same route they had themselves come, and so could not miss them. But many months passed and no tidings came, nor do we yet know the fate of our land or beloved Inca."

"He was cruelly slain by the men who invaded your land, and your prosperous nation

became the prey of the strangers," Professor Barton announced.

"And we could have done nothing to save him or the people?" the old chief cried, sitting suddenly erect in his litter, and gazing eagerly at the speaker.

"Nothing; it was of the gods," the aeronaut replied, using a phrase which he knew would

bring conviction to his hearer.

"The great burden of the centuries is lifted from our hearts," the old man exclaimed in reverent gratitude. "Through these many years we have feared that the final decision of those wandering nobles may not have been the true one; that they might have been a help to nation and king had they returned."

"No; but what was that decision?" Mr. Barton asked, hoping to induce the aged historian to continue his interesting narrative.

"When many months had passed and no message came, it was decided by the waiting people," he continued, "to go down the stream until some region was reached suitable for a new kingdom. Their property was great, and so huge floats were built, large enough to carry the whole company and their flocks and their treasure. On them they slowly sailed down

the river, until the rainy season set in, turning the whole district into a vast lake.

"It was but the beginning of disasters. Having no guide, and unable to control their rafts, they became lost in the many branches of the river and drifted on until their food was nearly exhausted, and many of the people had sickened and died with the fever. When finally they reached a place where the land again appeared, scarcely half their number remained.

"Here they landed and stayed for some months to recruit their health and replenish their stores; then they resumed their journey, travelling steadily to the north and east. After a time they came among some hills, where they were attacked by a large band of hostile natives. It was a fierce fight, and dearly won, for during it the young Inca and more than one hundred fighting men were killed. Their position, moreover, was one that could not long be maintained, and a hurried consultation was held. Reluctantly it was decided to bury the greater part of their treasures with the bodies of the young prince and the men who had died bravely defending him, and then to flee with the remainder, up a narrow gorge that opened upon their right, and which seemed to offer a better opportunity for defending themselves.

"During the darkness of the following night, the bodies of the slain, and the treasures they could best spare, were so skilfully buried as to give the attacking party the impression that they had been carried off by the fugitives; then the flight up the narrow valley was begun. When the sun arose, however, this precipitate action was repented of; for there seemed to be no outlet to the gorge, while the hostile Indians had closed in at its mouth, and the unhappy company was clearly in a trap from which it would be difficult to escape.

"For a full month the siege lasted, and then the besieged party, in direst extremity, sent out some men to see if there was not some point where the steep sides of the valley could be scaled. After two days the explorers returned, saying, 'There is a narrow trail up the mountain and along a lofty ridge for several miles, where it terminates against the side of a huge cliff, towering many hundred feet in the air.' In one place, however, this steep ascent could be climbed, and at the top was a great level plain, with a lake and running streams. uninhabited, and would not only sustain the fugitives, but would be easy of defence. they fled up the path, leaving a guard to protect their flight, and after much hardship and

difficulty, reached this plateau, with all their

company.

"Once upon the plain, the priest, who was a wondrously wise man, called another council. In this he said:—

"'Here we have a chance to establish ourselves again as a nation, but our Inca is dead, and there is no one to take his place. I advise that we form a federation, dividing the rule among the five nobles, with myself as counsellor.'

"His plan was adopted. At the centre of the lake, where there were three or four islets of pure white sandstone, the foundations for the capital were laid; and the discovery of a quarry of similar stone in another part of the plateau made the white city a possibility. Slowly it has become the beautiful town it now is.

"The plateau was divided into four sections naturally, by four streams flowing into the lake. One of these sections was assigned to each of the four cousins of the lost Inca, while the island city was intrusted to the half-uncle, who was also made the keeper of the State Treasure. The same wise, old ecclesiastic also announced the rules by which the land was to be governed in after years.

"Long before these plans were fully devel-

oped, however, there came a great storm, accompanied by thunders and lightnings, and a tremendous earthquake. When it was over, the guards, who had been left at the point of ascent, came running to announce that the narrow ridge, along which the people had come, had, under the earth's quakings, been completely severed from the great cliff, so that all communication with the country below was cut off.

"About two hundred and fifty years after the settlement here, the population had so increased that the plateau was becoming overcrowded, and would no longer support the people. This was especially true in the two smaller districts of Haurina and Arauco, while the curacas of Chochima and Zoctlan would not consent to parting with any of their territory, that it might be added to the overcrowded districts, as their own sections were well-nigh full. At length the curaca of Arauco revolted, and was followed by the chief of Haurina. The other curacas banded together to put down the rebellion, and the result was a fierce civil war for nearly five years. Finally, in a great battle at a small town in this province, the insurgents were overwhelmingly defeated, but many thousands on both sides were slain. This war was immediately followed by a great pestilence, sent by the gods as a punishment for the unnatural strife, and thousands more perished.

"Owing to these two afflictions, the population was reduced to about twenty thousand. That there should never be another uprising, the curacas now decreed that all sickly and imperfect children should be put to death at their birth, and that but three children should be allowed to one father and mother, every child after the third being immediately slain. These were harsh measures, but necessary for the safety of the land."

This was the old chieftain's story of his nation, and it deeply interested his hearers. Later on they learned some of the causes of the feud between Chasca and the high priest.

The ecclesiastic was a grandson of the curaca of Arauco, who had led the revolution of a hundred years before, so a natural hatred for the family of his conquerors had been fostered from his childhood. Entering the priesthood (because a second son), he had at length risen to the highest religious office in the land.

Once in the holy city he had used all his power and influence to undermine that of Chasca. In this he was aided by his nephew, now curaca of Arauco. But all their efforts had so far been fruitless. Naturally a keen, bright man, Chasca was also popular with his people, and upon the firmest terms of friendship with Tupac (who had married his sister), and with Haulpa, the curaca of Chochima. These three chiefs had not only firmly resisted all the priest's efforts to lessen Chasca's influence and increase his own, but had also sternly repressed several attempts of the ecclesiastic to interfere with the civil authorities in their administration of the state affairs, much to his

own chagrin and disappointment.

So the fact that Rod and Todd had won the favor of two of the most powerful chieftains of the country by the rescue of their daughters from a watery grave was enough, in itself, to arouse the animosity of the scheming priest against the strangers; when to this was added the fact that Chasca had brought forth from the treasure-house the garments of royalty and clothed the visitors therein, without consulting him, his animosity became the fiercest hatred. His first attempts to awaken hostility against the castaways, as already related, failed; but under his seeming acceptance of the inevitable, there still lurked a determination to accomplish his purpose - he only waited for an opportunity to carry it out.

During the weeks that had now slowly elapsed, the four aeronauts held many consultations as to the possibility of their escape from the plateau, but without result other than a resolve on their part to find some way to do so at the earliest opportunity. After Malca's story of the destruction of the rude pathway by which the Antalcans had reached the plain, the little party, under the guidance of Admaxla, made a trip to that part of the cliffs.

They found it was possible for them to descend about four thousand feet of the mountain side to the point where the break occurred. Then they were confronted by a chasm five hundred feet deep and a hundred wide, while its opposite side was fifty yards lower than the

cliff on which they stood.

The castaways gazed for some moments in silence. Then Rod said: —

"There's no way to bridge that abyss, is there, professor?"

"No," was the reply. "It is as I suspected — we must leave, as we came, in a balloon."

"In a balloon!" exclaimed both lads at once. "Why, how can we do that? The one in which we came is gone."

"Yes, but I will make one," was the smiling

response.

"Make one," repeated Mr. Todd, in amazement. "Why, you cannot obtain any gas on this mountain top!"

"Certainly not," explained the aeronaut; "I shall not need it. We will construct a hot-air balloon, such as were used by the first aeronauts, in the last century. We cannot take a long flight in one, but I think we can safely descend to the other side of this chasm, and from there make our way to the valley below. I had this in mind as a last resort, but had hoped we might be able to escape in some other manner."

He was silent for a short time. Then he

continued: -

"It will take me all of two weeks to make, with your help and that of the natives, what apparatus I shall need, and during that time we must prepare for our departure. If only the high priest leaves us undisturbed for that length of time, all will be well."

But inside of the specified time the four castaways were destined to pass through the most stirring scenes they had yet experienced.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MIDNIGHT PLOT.

It had seemed strange to the castaways that Admaxla should be so familiar with the interior arrangements of the temple. Not only did he know the secret and seldom-used way to the top of the dome, and the exact location of the tank in which the high priest Challeu was given his involuntary bath, but there was scarcely a nook or corner of the huge structure, and certainly not a single apartment, of which he did not know the exact location, the way to reach it, and the use to which it was put.

This knowledge of the sacred edifice and its surroundings was explained by the lad himself later on, however, when the visitors had acquired his language. He told them he was the second son of Tupac, an older brother having died about eighteen months before. As the curaca's office always descended to the eldest son, Admaxla, in accordance with another custom of the land, by which the roll of the priest-

hood was kept full, was, at the age of twelve

years, assigned to the temple service.

The rank of the family placed the boy in the white city, under the immediate charge of Challcu, who from the first disliked the youngster. Possibly Admaxla was somewhat to blame for this antipathy of the priest. Naturally overflowing with animal spirits, and keen enough to detect the fraud and hypocrisy in the life of the old ecclesiastic, he soon made it his chief business to dog the man's footsteps, and to play all manner of jokes upon him at every opportunity.

Upon one occasion the high priest had found Admaxla at the foot of the ladder leading up to the dome, and vexed that the lad should have ventured so far on what was forbidden ground to all the members of the priesthood but himself, he had thrown the intruder into the supply tank,

which happened at that time to be open.

After swimming about for some time, Admaxla discovered a flight of steps which led out of the water at the opposite end of the reservoir, and so escaped. The memory of the incident never left him: and when an opportunity came to give the high priest a taste of his own medicine, he was only too glad to make use of it.

On the death of his elder brother Admaxla,

to his great relief, had been taken home again, as he was now his father's heir; and the arrival of the strangers found him serving as chasquis, one of the preparatory steps to his ultimate

position.

Aware that the lad knew much about him which was not to his credit, and suspecting that he knew more than he really did, Challcu hated Admaxla even worse than he did Tupac and Chasca; and it was extremely galling to him that the youth was destined in time to succeed to the most powerful chieftainship in the state. This animosity had now been fanned into a white heat by the betrothal of Admaxla to Tara, the daughter of Chasca. The ceremony had taken place on the day the aeronauts landed upon the cliffs, and explains why Tupac and his family happened to be in the white city when they arrived there. As Tara was the only child of Chasca, this proposed marriage would eventually unite the two most powerful offices in the land — the Lord of the Treasury and the Lord of the Quipus - in one person; a circumstance that had never before happened in the history of the nation.

The sending of Admaxla to be with the strange guests had only added new fuel to the fire, and his presence in the sacred building was a constant source of irritation to the high priest. While the latter had no suspicion of the part played by Professor Barton and Rod in the disarranging of the lens, he did connect Admaxla with the dousing he had received in the tank. He, in fact, regarded the lad as a spy upon his own movements, and determined in some way to get rid of him.

So all the while that the castaways were making such progress in learning the native language, and winning the friendship of the three curacas, Challeu was constantly scheming some way to dispose of Admaxla, and at the same time deal a blow at the strangers. At length he came to a decision, and sent for his nephew Topar, curaca of Arauco.

On the very evening that Professor Barton announced to his friends that he had solved the problem of their escape from the plateau, if only the high priest should allow them another undisturbed two weeks, that dignitary and Topar were in close consultation in the private apartments of the priest.

"I tell you," the younger man was saying, "it is high time something was done to show Chasca and Tupac that they cannot have their way in everything."

"Exactly," his uncle assented, "and that is

just the reason I have called you here. I have a plan which means trouble for Chasca and Tupac, and also for those accursed strangers."

"But is it safe," queried Topar, "to meddle with the strangers? Did they not cause the sacred fire to be withheld until you gave homage? I fear if we include them in your plans, we shall only bring ruin upon ourselves."

The priest paled for a moment. Then he said harshly: "Let it come, then! I cannot see our enemies prosper and do nothing to hinder it. Listen, while I explain my plan.

"The boy Admaxla is in great favor with the strangers and stays with them constantly. Now if we can, on some pretext or other, gain control of the fellow, and confine him in your district, we can charge the visitors with his disappearance, and so bring about a rupture between them and Tupac. Perhaps we can even bring them to trial for the crime. Then after they are out of the way, we can mysteriously produce the lad, claiming the gods have returned him by our intercession, and so greatly enhance our influence among the people. By the same act also we shall have placed both Tupac and Chasca under obligations to us. Do you not think it worth the trial?"

The curaca paced back and forth for a few minutes in silence. Then he said scornfully:—

"Admaxla is no fool, and he would know who carried him off, and where he was confined. So the moment he was released he would give the whole thing away, and bring down the soldiers of Chasca and Tupac upon me. We should be plunged into another civil strife, and even if Nasca of Haurina join me, what is the paltry thousand men we are allowed to keep under arms beside the thousands the three curacas can produce; for Haulpa of Chochima will surely join forces with the other two. No; your plan is the height of folly."

Then before his uncle could speak, he went

on passionately: -

"Oh! I tell you it was a contemptible trick played on our fathers at the close of the old war — when they limited the armies of Haurina and Arauco to five hundred men each, while the other districts were to maintain a thousand apiece. It was a scheme to keep us down forever; but it will not succeed. Nasca and I each have an extra thousand men in secret training, and lances and bows concealed sufficient to arm them at a moment's notice. A little more time, and then let the proud ones beware, or the shields shall be broken on their

palace steps [the native method of declaring war], and we will drive them over the cliffs before they learn we can meet them man to man."

Challcu's face darkened, and his eyes glittered ominously, as Topar scornfully criticised his plan. It was not a safe thing, even for his nephew, to cross him or tell him he was at fault. But when the younger man went on with his passionate outburst, the countenance of the wily priest cleared, and sure that he had in Topar a stronger confederate than he had dared to hope, he only remarked:—

"Tell me how you would manage this affair."

For a moment the curaca hesitated, then speaking slowly he replied: "In this way. We will take the boy prisoner, as you say, but instead of confining him in my district as you suggest, I will deliver him to some trusty men who shall carry him to the edge of the great cliff, and throw him down. 'Dead llamas do not bleat.' Then we can accuse the strangers of putting him out of the way, and so bring them to judgment. When they have been disposed of, and the affair has quieted down, I can approach Chasca, asking Tara as wife for my son. With Admaxla no longer living, where is there a more suitable union for his daughter?

And I am inclined to think that he will listen to my overtures. If so, the time will come when Arauco and the white city will be joined together instead of the white city and Zoctlan. My son will be the Lord of the Treasury, and so, holding the balance of power, may become the first Inca of Antalca. It is a wider scheme than yours, uncle, and yet it does not involve so much risk. Help me to carry it out, and I promise you that the priesthood shall also be so arranged that its chief office shall remain in your family forever."

"It is a bold plan, a daring one," the old man murmured, with sparkling eyes; "it goes farther than I had ever dared to scheme. I had hoped to secure the office of high priest for our family; but the head chieftainship, possibly a throne—that was farther than I saw. And yet, why not? Sit down, nephew, and let us arrange for the carrying out of the first

steps in this move as soon as possible."

For an hour longer the details were discussed, and then the two men parted, apparently well pleased with their arrangements.

It was in accordance with the plans thus formed, that at a late hour the following night an under priest rapped at the door of the castaways' apartments. Admaxla, who slept in the

outer chamber, drew aside the curtains and admitted the visitor.

He soon made known his errand.

"The high priest has been suddenly taken ill," announced he; "and it is feared that he is dying. It is necessary that some one go as messenger to Zoctlan, to the priest Xauxa, who, as you know, is Challcu's successor. He must come in time to learn the secrets, and receive the tokens of the high priesthood. There is no other chasquis in the temple. Can you go?"

"Certainly," the lad answered. Then he turned to the four castaways, who, awakened by the voice of the messenger, now emerged from their bedroom. In a few words he explained to them the situation, saying:—

"With your permission I will carry the

message."

Professor Barton looked doubtfully at him for a moment, but Admaxla nodded reassuringly, so he said:—

"Why, of course, if you can be of any service, go; but run no useless risks. How soon

will you be back?"

"By an hour after sunrise, unless I am delayed," the boy answered.

"Very well," the aeronaut responded; and

the young native followed the waiting attendant out of the room.

After they had disappeared, the professor said to his comrades:—

"I cannot help feeling that there is something wrong about this midnight call. Possibly it is a move of the old priest to get Admaxla out of the way, while he wreaks his vengeance on us. Let us dress ourselves, therefore, and be prepared for any emergency. I may be unnecessarily suspicious, but if so, we shall only lose a little sleep, and it is wiser to do that than to run any risk," an opinion the others also held, so they rapidly put on their clothing.

Meanwhile the under priest led Admaxla directly to the rooms of the high priest, where he found Challeu lying upon a couch breathing heavily and groaning from time to time. About the room were several attendants, evidently try-

ing to relieve the sick man's suffering.

As Admaxla entered the apartment, the old priest roused himself a little, and motioned for the boy to come to the bedside. Raising himself on one hand, the sufferer gestured to the others to leave him alone with the lad. Then he began to give his directions to the listening youth, but his voice was so faint that it was difficult to distinguish his words, and Admaxla

bent low over the couch that he might hear him better.

As he did so there came a sudden rush behind him, his feet were seized and dragged from under him, while Challcu's arms were thrown about his neck with a grasp surprisingly strong for one who seemed so near death. Before the astonished lad could cry out, a gag was placed in his mouth, his hands and feet were tied, and he was thrown upon the floor.

He lay there for a moment, while the high priest, now apparently as well as ever, held a hurried consultation with some one. Then two men picked him up, and, preceded and followed by a number of soldiers, they bore their unwilling but helpless captive down the stairs and out into the park. When there they broke into a quick though noiseless trot, and turned down one of the silent streets leading to the lake.

CHAPTER XVI.

TARA'S DISCOVERY.

THERE is almost always some factor which rogues do not take account of when making their plans, and which oftentimes leads to the entire overthrow of their most carefully laid schemes. This was markedly the case of Challcu and Topar. There was one thing which occurred that night which they did not foresee, which indeed they could not well foresee, and so were not on their guard against; and yet that thing, small in itself, led to the complete frustration of their plot.

The curaca of Arauco was very particular to carry his prisoner out of the sacred building by way of the vestibule directly opposite the one under the apartments occupied by the castaways. They were in the eastern end of the temple, and Topar purposely left it at the west end, in order that no sound of the marching men might reach the strangers, and so arouse their suspicions. But that very precaution was

the link in the chain of his own undoing.

It happened thus: Tara's aunt was one of the virgins of the sun, whose apartments were located in the western portion of the great building. On this particular night it chanced to fall to her lot to be the guardian of the sacred fire during the first half of the night. This fire was kept burning continually on a small altar in the private chapel of the virgins, and was constantly watched by them, lest through some mishap it should go out. The daughter of Chasca knew that this duty fell to her aunt, and had earnestly begged that she might share the vigil, a request which was cheerfully granted.

So when the hour of midnight came, and with it the end of the vestal watch, Tara took a loving leave of her relative, and started to go through the park to her home alone, knowing that it was perfectly safe for her to do so. She had already descended the broad staircase, and was about to lift the curtain at its foot that she might enter the vestibule, when she heard the low tramp of feet coming down the opposite stairs which led to the priest's quarters. Somewhat surprised by what she knew was an unusual occurrence, she halted, and, standing behind the heavy portières, peered curiously between them to gain a view of the prowlers.

She did not have long to wait. The curtains

at the foot of the other stairway were soon thrust aside, and between them came a company of seven men, all soldiers, and two of them were bearing an eighth person, securely bound. As the little squad passed under the lamp hanging from the centre of the ceiling, the hidden girl recognized the leader to be Topar, the curaca of Arauco. Then, with a start, she saw that the captive was no other than her cousin Admaxla, and it was with great difficulty that she restrained a scream. Plainly the lad was in great danger from the hands of his enemy.

Tara was a brave girl, and immediately realized that something must be done in order to release her affianced husband from his captors. Thinking busily, she watched the soldiers pass through the great doorway and down the steps to the park. Then acting under a sudden impulse, she stole silently from her hiding-place and followed

them.

Taking good care to keep far enough behind the men to be out of their sight, she quietly pursued them until, skirting the park, they turned down one of the streets leading to the eastern shore of the lake. Puzzled by this movement, for the curaca of Arauco would naturally go in nearly the opposite direction to reach his own city, the girl now paused for a moment. What should she do? Topar was evidently about to leave the city with his prisoner; where was he going? Whom should she call to her aid? Ah! the strangers, to be sure! Were they not very wise and very powerful as well? Had not one of them saved her from a death in the lake? Had not their leader caught and handled the sacred fire from the sun? Perhaps he could tell just where the wicked curaca was going to take his captive, and would compel him to bring her lover back. To the strangers then she would go at once.

Turning abruptly, Tara hastened back across the square to the temple, entering it, however, by the eastern portal, and made her way directly to the apartment where Professor Barton and his companions were anxiously discussing the question of Admaxla's safety. In answer to her timid knock, Rod came quickly to the entrance and lifted the curtain. He started back in surprise on seeing who the visitor was, but said cordially, "Come in!"

Tara entered, blushing deeply as she now recalled how unmaidenly it was for her to visit the strangers alone at that time of night; but the danger which threatened Admaxla was paramount, and without hesitation she quickly made known her errand. Explaining briefly how she came to be in the temple at that midnight hour, she described what she had witnessed in the western vestibule, and how she had followed the curaca and his men until sure they were going to leave the city. In closing she said:—

"Then I came directly here, for I knew that if any one had the power to save my cousin, it was the visitors from the sun."

During her story the castaways had exchanged startled glances, but at its close the professor said earnestly:—

"We will certainly do all in our power to rescue Admaxla from his captors." Then turning to his comrades he inquired: "What would you advise as our first move? We must act quickly."

"I should think it wisest to let Chasca know what has happened at once, and ask his advice,"

Rod suggested.

"Very good," assented the aeronaut. "Tara,

can you conduct us to your father?"

The maiden nodded, and in a few minutes more the four visitors were following her across the park, having made their exit from the sacred edifice without meeting any one. It took but a short time to reach the palace of the curaca and, once there, Tara led them

to the court, and motioning them to seats, left them.

A moment or two later she returned, accompanied by her father, who was talking with her excitedly. But even in his excitement he did not forget the customary obeisance to his guests, and then asked quickly: -

"What is this that Tara tells me? Has Admaxla really been carried away by the curaca of Arauco? I can scarcely believe

it."

"I am afraid it is only too true," replied Mr. Barton. "I will tell you what we know in addition to what Tara has discovered;" and he told of the visit of the under priest to their rooms, of the story he related, and of his request that the lad should act as messenger. He also spoke of their own misgiving over the lad's departure.

When he had finished, Tara again gave a detailed account of what she had seen in the vestibule of the temple, and how she had followed the captors until she was sure of the direction they had taken. Here the professor interrupted to say:—

"I don't quite understand why Topar should go in that direction. Does not Arauco lie the

other way?"

"I can explain that movement, I think," responded Chasca; "but let Tara finish her story."

So the maiden told of her resolve to seek the aid of the strangers, and of their desire to consult her father. Then the chieftain said:—

"Topar took the route he did as a blind, should any one happen to notice his flight. He will probably land at the foot of the great road leading to Haurina, and going up that some distance, will then take a cross path which joins the main highway a couple of miles or so this side of his own city. I will call out a company of my soldiers, and by taking the more direct route we can easily reach the junction of the roads before him. Falling unexpectedly into our ambush there, it will be no hard task for us to overpower him and his men and rescue Admaxla."

"No! no!" exclaimed the aeronaut, eagerly. "I have a better plan than that, and one which, if we can carry it out, will not only make Topar glad to surrender the lad to us, but will also prevent all bloodshed. I wonder if you can furnish me with the necessary apparatus?"

"I will gladly give you whatever is in my power," replied Chasca, a little mystified by, yet having implicit faith in, the proposition of

his guest.

The professor gave a few rapid directions, the curaca nodded assent, and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he was accompanied by three servants, each bearing in his arms a large package wrapped in dark woollen cloths, evidently the articles Mr. Barton had requested for the carrying out of his plan. A moment or two more was spent in completing their preparations, and then the party, consisting of the four visitors, Chasca, and the three serving men, set forth for the lake-side.

Arriving at that part of the public wharf directly opposite the point where their landing was to be made, they found a light barge awaiting them. It was manned by eight oarsmen under the charge of a helmsman. As the little party came down upon the dock, this officer

saluted Chasca and reported: -

"Your message came, and I am all ready, sir."

"You are prompt, as usual, and it is well," said the curaca, greatly pleased. Then he motioned for his companions to embark.

In an instant the ropes were cast off, and the rowers had dipped their muffled oars deep into the lake, sending the light craft swiftly, but noiselessly, away from the city. Across the

water to the southeast could be seen a light which the chieftain, in low tones, informed his guests was upon the end of the pier where the great road from Haurina reached the shore.

"There is where Topar will land, if I mistake not," he concluded; "and you can see for yourselves the advantage we have over him. Our own run on the lake is not half as far," and he pointed out a light toward which the boat, under the skilful rowing of the sturdy oarsmen, fairly seemed to fly.

During the passage, he also explained more fully his idea of the movements of the kid-

nappers.

"They will land at the dock I have pointed out to you," said he. "Then they will go up the highway about two miles, striking the cross-road which leads to Arauco. It joins the road we take about midway between that city and our landing. We can easily reach the junction before the other party, and carry out your ideas, sire, whatever they are." The last sentence was addressed to Professor Barton.

"You are quite sure Topar and his men will enter the main road at that point?" inquired the aeronaut, somewhat anxiously. "It will not do to have them escape us, by going some more direct way, and so reach Arauco safely. Once they are in the city, our chances of liberating Admaxla to-night will be small indeed."

"Of course I am not sure of it," Chasca answered gravely; "but it seems to me the most natural way for them to proceed, since they took the eastern route. They may join the great road nearer to the lake, but that would not interfere in any way with our plans. It is not at all probable that they will enter Arauco from any other side than this. Of that I am confident."

"All right," said the professor; "I may as well, then, explain my scheme more fully, and assign to each of you the parts I wish you to take in carrying it out."

The remainder of the voyage was devoted to a full discussion of the details, and when, in a surprisingly short time, the wharf was reached, each one of the little party knew exactly what was expected of him in the coming encounter.

When Chasca and his friends had disembarked, the former called the helmsman to him, and directed him to take his boat down the shore a half-mile or so.

"Wait there," he continued, "until a light is swung to and fro upon the pier. At that signal you are to return here for us."

This was done that there might be nothing

to arouse the suspicions of Topar and his followers, if they, after taking a long circuit up the lake, should make a landing at this point, instead of going the longer route of the Haurina road.

As the craft disappeared in the darkness, the little company started briskly up the wharf, toward the junction where they were to await the coming of Admaxla and his captors. Twenty-five minutes of quick walking brought them to the place. All was quiet, and there were no indications that any one was near at hand. The professor speedily arranged his companions in the positions he desired them to occupy. Then the tiresome task of waiting was begun.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SUCCESSFUL RUSE.

When Admaxla's feet were pulled from under him, and he felt the high priest's arms encircling his neck with their suffocating grasp, he was naturally enough greatly alarmed. But when he had been gagged and bound, and found himself being carried out of the temple, his usual self-possession returned to him.

Having caught a glimpse of the leader of his assailants as they passed under the light in the temple vestibule, he recognized in him the curaca of Arauco, and noted, therefore, with some surprise, the direction the captors took upon leaving the park. He was not astonished, however, to find a barge in waiting when they reached the dock.

Into this he was roughly thrown. The rest of the squad followed leisurely, as though confident they would not be pursued, and then the craft moved slowly off into the lake.

As he lay in the bottom of the vessel

Admaxla's brain was busily at work to find some explanation for his seizure. He did not for a moment regard himself as the chief object in view, nor did he feel alarmed about his personal safety. Reasoning that should anything serious happen to him, the priest and his nephew would only bring upon themselves the vengeance of his father and Chasca, the boy at once dismissed the thought.

No; the more he turned the matter over in his mind, the more convinced he became that he had been carried off in order that Challcu might have an unimpeded opportunity to vent his spite upon the strangers. When that was done, he would be set free. His chief concern, therefore, was how the castaways might be warned in time to prevent harm from coming to them.

When the boat reached the mainland, the lad had arrived at no satisfactory conclusion in the matter. He could only wait his time, on the alert to use an opportunity for escape the moment it seemed to be at hand.

As the barge was made fast to the wharf, one of the soldiers bent over him and severed the bonds around his ankles.

"Get up," he said.

The boy did so, and it was a great relief

after lying in the cramped position he had occupied for the last half-hour. As he stepped out upon the pier, he, notwithstanding the darkness, recognized it as the one where the great road to Haurina began, and was more than ever puzzled by the fact. Where were his captors taking him?

After consulting a moment with Topar, the soldier who had cut his fetters came and removed the gag from his mouth, saying as he did so:—

"So long as you keep quiet all will be well; but if you utter a cry, I'll run you through with my spear. We don't intend to carry you all the way, and you cannot walk far with that stick in your mouth."

Admaxla nodded his assent, thankful to be relieved of the gag upon any conditions. He secretly rejoiced, moreover, as he was now free, with the exception of his hands, and hoped to be able to escape from his captors in some way before their destination should be reached.

When the curaca had given a few instructions to his barge master the little party set forth, Topar in the lead, followed by Admaxla between two of the soldiers, while the other four men brought up the rear. The great highway was kept to the first cross-road, when

a turn was made to the right. The prisoner knew from the direction now taken that Arauco was their destination, and it gave him fresh courage. He was confident that in the eight miles or more which they must travel to reach the town, he would find some opportunity to break loose from his captors.

The squad pushed on at a pace that took them rapidly over the smooth way, which they could easily follow though the night was exceedingly dark. Moment after moment passed, and although Admaxla kept a sharp lookout, he had seen as yet no chance of escape. By villages and solitary dwellings they went, meeting no one, and hearing no sound save the low tread of their own feet. Evidently the whole district was fast asleep.

With every step the lad's heart grew heavier and heavier, and his hopes fell lower and lower. His guards were keeping too good a watch over him to admit of a sudden break from them, and when at length he knew they were approaching the point where the road they were on crossed the great highway from Arauco to the lake, he was almost in despair.

Then suddenly, from a spot just in front of them, a light burst forth, rather faint at first, and flashing this way and that, but all the time growing brighter and brighter. Before the startled soldiers had collected their wits, a second light shone forth on the left, and a third upon their right. Back and forth the uncanny illuminations wavered, now this way, now that, slower and still more slowly, until the three converged upon the crossing of the thoroughfares just before them.

As the amazed spectators gazed, there suddenly appeared, in the midst of that unearthly radiance, a form, — a form so tall, that, in the excited and awe-stricken condition of the watchers, it seemed to tower up to the very heavens. Clad in the royal robes, with a flashing sword in his hand, and a look upon his face which awoke their greatest fear, Professor Barton confronted them.

Slowly raising the weapon in his hand, until it pointed straight at the trembling throng, he sternly uttered the one word:—

"Admaxla!"

With that utterance the last vestige of selfcontrol left Topar and his men, and with loud cries of fear they turned and ran back up the road down which they had just come, leaving their prisoner standing alone before the aeronaut.

If the other natives had been alarmed and

awed by what they regarded as a direct intervention of the gods, it was not so with the captive lad. As soon as he recognized Professor Barton, his apprehensions had fled, for he knew his friend was there to save him. How the professor came to know of his predicament, he could not imagine; nor could he understand in what way the wise stranger knew just when and where to intercept his captors. The manner of his coming, and his mysterious appearance in the centre of that seemingly miraculous light, the boy took as a matter of little moment. It was his friend's way of confounding his enemies, and it had been effectual; with that he was content. He was not afraid of him.

So as the curaca of Arauco and his party disappeared up the cross-road, Admaxla advanced joyfully to meet Mr. Barton. The latter received him warmly, and quickly cut the ropes confining the lad's hands. Then, from their various places of concealment, came the other three visitors, Chasca, and his three servants.

After their greetings were over, Rod turned

to the aeronaut and said exultingly: -

"Your plan was a success, professor. I confess, had I been one of Topar's company I should have fled with them."

"But, tell me," interrupted the native lad,

"how did you know of my capture, and where to meet us? And what is this plan of which

Rod speaks?"

"We will gladly tell you all," Professor Barton said heartily. "Tara has been your guardian angel this time;" and he related the maiden's discovery, her appeal to them, the consultation with Chasca, and their hurried trip across the lake. Then he continued: -

"As to the plan of which Rod speaks, he refers to the way in which I gave Topar and his men such a scare. I can easily explain that. I sent Rod a little way to the south on the great highway, and Todd an equal space to the north; while Mr. Todd went about the same distance to the west, on the cross-road. Each of them carried one of your small metal lamps and a large silver mirror; but the lights were kept carefully concealed until Chasca, who had been sent east along the cross-road, reported that the kidnappers were coming.

"The lamps were then uncovered, and the mirrors placed behind them in such a way as to reflect their lights to the juncture of the roads. When they were all focussed there, I arose from the road, where I had been lying, and confronted you. You see it was a simple matter after all."

But in spite of the fact that Chasca had been a partaker in the plan, and that the aeronaut had so fully explained the whole affair to Admaxla, the curaca and lad regarded it as another proof that the visitors were the children of the sun in very truth. How would they have thought of and carried out the successful ruse if they were not wiser than the children of men?

Mr. Todd now suggested that it would be well to start at once on their return, that they might reach the city before daylight. To this the rest gave a hearty approval, and gathering up the lamps and mirrors, which were turned over to the serving men, they set out at a brisk walk for the lake.

The return trip was made without incident, and the rescuers arrived in the white city an hour or more before dawn, without meeting a person. Just before the curaca parted with them, Professor Barton drew him one side and said:—

"No one but the members of our own party, Chasca, knows anything of the occurrences of this night; and the kidnappers saw no one at the junction of the roads but myself. You readily understand, therefore, that it will be well to have nothing said whatever in regard to the affair. Publicity can do no good, while

silence will shroud the entire circumstance of Admaxla's deliverance with mystery, and throw Challcu and his confederates into greater perplexity than ever," a suggestion to which the chieftain gave a willing assent.

Upon their return to their apartments in the temple, the four castaways retired for a few hours' rest. But the native lad only lay down until he heard the horn giving forth its notes in honor of the rising sun. Then he arose to carry out a little plan of his own which ever since his rescue had been in his mind.

He knew that it was a custom of the high priest to take a walk in the park after the morning service. Slipping downstairs and out of the eastern portal while all were intent on the sacred ceremonies, he went directly to a point where he believed the old ecclesiastic would pass in his promenade. Concealing himself there among some shrubbery he waited.

In ten or fifteen minutes Challcu came in sight on his way down the path, and to the delight of the concealed boy was unattended by any of the subordinate priests. Crouching low until he was nearly opposite him, Admaxla stepped suddenly forth before the unsuspecting man. Then as the dignitary started back in amazement and alarm, the lad said politely:—

"Good morning, Challcu! I see you have quite recovered from your recent illness."

The high priest for a moment paled perceptibly. In some way unaccountable to him his plot had failed, the hated youth was at liberty, and knew who his assailants were. What the outcome would now be, he could not tell; and the uncertainty and fear which swept through his heart for an instant nearly overwhelmed him. Then uttering an exclamation of mingled wrath and mortification, he made a dash at the lad. He would seize him and throttle him, then and there, before he could make known the attack upon him.

Admaxla was too quick for him, however, and with a mocking laugh dodged quickly by him and ran off up the path, leaving the baffled schemer shaking his fists in impotent rage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STARTLING PROPOSAL.

For some minutes the high priest stood there muttering incoherently and shaking his clenched fists in an impotent rage. But at length he recollected where he was, and looked furtively about him. Drawing a sigh of relief as he saw that no one had witnessed his outburst of passion, he resumed his interrupted walk.

But though he was now outwardly calm, the tempest still boiled and seethed within him. One moment he was ready to tear the hapless Admaxla in pieces, had he been within his reach; the next his wrath was kindled against his nephew, who must have failed in some part of his trust, as the ecclesiastic viewed the matter. Then he would turn his angry thoughts to the strange visitors, whose coming had precipitated him into the unhappy predicament in which he now found himself.

With the thought of the strangers, a dread

would come into his heart, and his cheeks would pale. How much did they know of this affair, and how would it affect their conduct toward him? For, try to hide the fact as he could, and he never admitted it even to himself, Challcu was afraid of Professor Barton and his comrades.

Still the predominating feeling in the high priest's mind was one of anger against Topar. View it in any light he would, the old ecclesiastic could not help feeling that the curaca had been remiss in his duty. The chief blame rested on him, therefore, and he must be made to smart for it.

As soon as the noon service in the temple should be over, he would go and interview his nephew. It must be impressed upon his mind that his uncle would allow no trifling, even by him, with his plans.

Having reached this conclusion, Challeu retraced his steps to the temple, that he might make the necessary preparations for his contemplated trip. He arranged for an assistant to take charge of the evening service, and also the one of the following morning, and ordered his official litter to be at the door promptly at the close of the noon ceremonies.

His orders were strictly obeyed, and an hour

after noon found him across the lake and well on his way to his native city. Once there, he was borne directly to the palace of Topar in the centre of the town. During the entire journey the priest's wrath at his nephew's carelessness had been steadily rising, and the moment he entered the room where the curaca sat busily engaged with matters pertaining to his province, the old man burst forth with a shower of abuse:—

"A fine mess you've made of it, haven't you? A nice guard you must have kept over Admaxla, that you couldn't hold him captive for six hours! A remarkable planner you, to fail thus at the very beginning! How do you ever expect to get the best of Chasca and —"

"Hush!" interposed the younger man, who had listened to his uncle up to this point in silence; "if you do not wish to have all Antalca know your plans, it would be well to lower your voice. As for what you accuse me of," he went on calmly, "I am perfectly innocent. You could have done no better yourself. Listen!" and he related the story of Admaxla's rescue, as it had appeared to him, closing as follows:—

"I told you, Uncle Challeu, as you may remember, that it was not safe to make any plans which were against the strangers, and the outcome has proved the truth of my words. How did the tall visitor know that Admaxla had been seized? We met no one by the way. Who told him what route we were to take? I had not made that fact known even to you. How came he to outstrip us, and stand awaiting us there at the fork of the roads? Have you heard of any boat that took him across the lake? What was that light that streamed forth from every quarter of the heavens, and surrounded the man with the brightness of the sun? I have my own explanation, which I freely give you: he and his comrades are certainly more than mortal."

When Topar first interrupted the high priest with his timely rebuke, that dignitary became so angry he could scarcely control himself; but as the curaca went on with his story of the happenings at the cross-roads, the look on the old ecclesiastic's face changed to one of fear. Nor was that alarm lessened as the nephew by his shrewd questions and final announcement proclaimed his own estimation of the character of the nation's guests. For a moment after the narrative was finished he stood there non-plussed, then, rallying himself with great effort, he said with a sneer:—

"That is surely a fine tale to cover your own carelessness. Gods, indeed! Chicken thieves, more likely! And you expect me to believe that nonsense?"

"Very well," responded the curaca, with a quiet smile. He was evidently resolved not to be taunted into a passion. Taking up a small silver bell on the table beside him, he rang it sharply. It was answered in a moment by a domestic, to whom he said:—

"Send Vira and Chanca here at once."

The servant withdrew, and the men were silent until the curtains were lifted and two soldiers entered and saluted.

"Tell the high priest what you saw at the junction of the roads last night, Vira," said Topar, curtly.

The older of the soldiers stepped forward,

and with an imploring gesture cried: -

"I beg of you, sire—"

"Go on!" exclaimed the chief, sternly.

The man paled perceptibly, and his voice trembled as he complied. When he had done the curaca asked:—

- "Chanca, have you any correction to make?"
- "No, sire," replied the second soldier. "It is as he has said."
 - "You are dismissed."

After they had filed out of the room, the young man turned to the old one, saying:—

"What do you think now, uncle? Have I

told you the truth?"

"I believe you have," was the reluctant assent.

"But it does not change my determination to have my revenge on the strangers, only it must come in another way. But of that I will speak later; let me now ask, what are your future plans? Admaxla will certainly tell his father and Chasca of what has happened, and you and I will be called upon to answer to them for what we have done. How are you going to meet their charges?"

"If it were not for the strangers' presence here, and their friendship for Tupac and his brother-in-law, I would revolt the moment they preferred charges against me," the curaca replied. "But so long as these children of the sun side with our enemies, we must submit."

"Bah!" ejaculated the ecclesiastic; "you are a woman. Where has your pride gone? Where is your courage? Let me advise this time. Perhaps my plans will not seem so foolish as they did before."

"I am willing to listen to any suggestions

you care to make," was the answer.

For hours the two men talked together, the

priest cajoling, threatening, entreating, explaining, and night had come long before the conference was brought to a close. At last Topar agreed to his uncle's plan, and the latter said, as he prepared to return to the white city:—

"Then it is settled. You will see Nasca of Haurina, and persuade him to side with us. If he consents, we will, when Chasca calls us to account for this kidnapping affair, make the

counter proposal."

"Yes, I will go over to Haurina to-morrow, and do my best to enlist Nasca on our side; and as soon as I have done so, will send you word. We will then be all ready for the movements of the enemy. But will you not eat before you return, uncle?"

"No, I must set forth at once;" and in a moment more Challeu was in his litter and

moving toward the city at a rapid pace.

The following day the curaca of Arauco made a formal call upon his colleague at the neighboring town, and held a lengthy interview with him. The result was eminently satisfactory, to judge from the expression of his face as he journeyed homeward. On his arrival there, he immediately despatched a courier to the high priest with the single sentence:—

"All is well."

The receipt of this message gave the old ecclesiastic great satisfaction, and he rubbed his hands gleefully in anticipation of the coming conflict; for he did not doubt that Chasca and Tupac would call a meeting of the Senate, at which they would lay the charge of conspiracy against himself and his nephew. He was on the watch for the first indications of such an action on their part, and also kept an under priest constantly shadowing the strangers, that they might not in any way interfere with his new plot.

But the days dragged slowly on — one, two, three, — and still Chasca made no demonstration. The high priest was much puzzled by this fact, and not a little disappointed as well. Unless something was done immediately, the opportunity on which he was counting for the success of his last plan would be gone. So on the fourth day he decided to force matters, and resort to one of his rights as the presiding officer of the Antalcan Senate.

In consequence of this decision, the five curacas were all exceedingly amazed and mystified by a summons to attend a special Senate meeting on the next day. In all the history of the nation, such a thing had never occurred before. While the high priest had the power to convene the Senate, it was an understood rule of that body that only the curaca of the white city should actually call them together. There was an inkling in the minds of all,

There was an inkling in the minds of all, however, that the call had something to do with the strange visitants to the plateau, but just what the high priest had determined to do, was not clear even to Topar. With their curiosity aroused to the highest pitch, the five civil dignitaries of the mountain realm were promptly on hand the following day at about ten o'clock, the hour set for the meeting.

They had all taken their places in the council chamber when the high priest, clad in his most gorgeous robes, entered the apartment and took his place upon the dais. After the usual form of opening the assembly had been gone through with, Challeu arose and said in his suavest and most conciliating tones:—

"My brothers, you are all, no doubt, wondering why I have departed from a well-known custom of our nation, and, in accordance with a right which, though never before used, is clearly mine, have ventured to call you together at this unusual time. You will recollect, however, that in three days comes the feast of Raymi, when the sun-god, having reached the southernmost point in his course, turns and comes back again

to his own land. You will also remember that each year, when this festival comes, we are accustomed to sacrifice the most beautiful maiden in all Antalca to our glorious god, in return for his many mercies to us during the twelve months.

"But this year there have come to us some mysterious visitors, claiming to have descended from the home of the sun; they are even now the guests of this temple. There is a doubt in the minds of some of us, however, as to the genuineness of their claim," - and he waved his hand toward Topar and Nasca, - "and it has been suggested that instead of our usual offering we shall cause our visitors to undergo

a test in proof of their divinity.

"This test shall be this: the great altar in the temple shall be removed, and the strangers may delegate one of their number to stand beneath the dome when at noon the god sends the fire to light the sacrifice. If the one chosen shall be able to endure the very essence of the sun-god himself, then will we know that he and his comrades are indeed children of the sun. But if not, then they all shall be sacrificed to appease the anger of a god who has been outraged by their blasphemous claims. What say you, my brothers?"

As the high priest ceased and looked down upon the assembled curacas with a bland smile, there came a dead silence. No one spoke for a full minute. Then Chasca jumped to his feet and burst forth:—

"Oh, man! thou counsellest vain things! Thy suggestions are born of foolishness and of a wicked heart! For the ruin of our land dost thou speak; that thou mayest bring down the vengeance of the gods upon the nation for an insult offered to the children they have condescended to send among us. Rather had I that my daughter should be the offering to the sun, than that this sacrilege should be committed."

He had barely taken his seat when Tupac sprang to his feet and in vigorous language sustained his brother-in-law. He said:—

"We know that the strangers are all that they claim to be, my brothers. Did they not restrain the sacred fire until our high priest himself gave them homage? Have they not told us of the fate of the land from which our fathers sprang? Have they done us aught but good since they came among us, defeating even the counsels of the wicked? I say this great wrong shall not be done."

A stormy half-hour ensued. The priest and

his nephew, supported by Nasca, contended that the test was lawful, and would not in any way bring down the wrath of the gods upon the nation; while the other three members of the Senate were as positive in their denunciations of the ecclesiastic and his plans, and their conviction that it meant woe to the people.

At length the curaca of the white city believed he saw a way out of the difficulty that confronted him and his colleagues. Consulting

with them a moment, he announced: -

"I have a proposal to make. Let us submit the matter to the strangers themselves. If they consent to the test, all is well. If not, then we shall know, once for all, that they are not the true children of the sun, but are impostors."

This he said because his faith in the guests was so great that he felt sure they would in some way defeat the high priest's scheme, when

they knew of it.

Challcu's eyes sparkled at this suggestion of Chasca. He thought his purpose would now certainly be attained. For should the strangers object to the test (a course he felt sure they would adopt), all would believe them to be frauds. So he assented to the arrangement, and a messenger was sent in haste for the aeronauts.

They came immediately, and when they had been ushered to their seats, Chasca, as spokesman for the Senate, made known to them the high priest's wish, and his own opposition to it. He in fact stated just how the Senate was divided in its opinion, and that finally it had been decided to submit the matter to the visitors themselves.

The answer of the professor to the startling proposition came promptly. Moreover it was a complete surprise to all the assembled dignitaries, and a bitter disappointment to Challeu and his confederates. Looking the priest squarely in the face, he said slowly and distinctly:—

"We accept the test. I myself will represent my companions on the third day at noon."

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE GODS.

When the castaways reached their rooms, Mr. Todd and the lads were loud in their condemnation of the aeronaut's act.

"Why did you make that promise, professor?" asked Rod. "If you had not, we might have fled before the feast day, and escaped. But now your word is given, and we must remain."

"Yes, indeed," chimed in Todd. "You might have told them we would let them know our decision in the morning, and then we could have made our escape during the night.

"It certainly seems too bad," added the manufacturer, "that you should run any risk needlessly, Mr. Barton. Could not some other way out of the predicament have been found?"

The aeronaut took their chidings in good humor. "Wait one moment," said he. "Let us look at this unfortunate affair from all sides. Although since Admaxla's capture and release I have been hastening my preparations for our departure, assisted by you all, I have not in the week been able to complete them, and it will surely take three days more to do so. So we are not ready to flee, even were that possible.

"Again, there is no doubt that until after this feast day has come, Challeu will keep us under a strict surveillance, as he has been doing for a number of days; so that the moment we attempted flight we should be seized and made prisoners. Then we should all be in danger of our lives, for even our friends would believe we

were impostors.

"Finally, we were in a crisis where to falter would have been to have lost all the prestige we have gained since we have been here. This test was a cunningly devised plan of our enemies to overthrow us. Challcu expected us either to refuse the proposition he made outright, or else to turn it aside in some way. In either case he would have declared we were not the children of the sun. The fact that I promptly accepted the offer, and pledged myself to act as the representative of my party, was a direct slap in the old priest's face. No one is so disconcerted as he, and he will grow more and more uneasy up to the hour of the contest. Then, too, why shouldn't I accept the test? We have only to

put the lens in the dome out of focus, and there will be no danger whatever."

"But," objected Rod, "suppose the old rascal places a guard over the staircase leading into the dome, and we are unable to shift the lens? What then?"

The professor smiled, though somewhat gravely. "It is not likely that the priest will do so," he remarked, "for he found everything in order when he made his last examination. But should he do it, we are not without friends, and must at the last moment force our way into the dome. If that is impossible—why, I trust I shall die as a Christian and an American should, while you must make a desperate effort for freedom."

A silence fell upon the little company for some moments. All were thinking of the loved ones at home, and wondering whether they should ever see them again. Truly they were now in the gravest situation they had experienced during their wanderings; and a prayer went up from each heart that the same kind providence who had brought them safely through all their previous perils might also protect them in this one.

At length Rod burst forth: "We must succeed in changing the lens, professor. We can-

not spare you, and would not if we could. There must be some way out of this awful scrape, I'm sure."

"We will do our best, whatever the outcome,"

was the reply.

All further chance of conversation was stopped by the entrance of Chasca, Tupac, and Haulpa. The three curacas had come to assure their guests that they still had firm faith in them, and to beg them not to count the request of the high priest and his confederates as the wish of the land.

"Our whole nation regard you, as indeed you are, the children of the sun," said the ruler of the white city: "and if this crime must be answered for, we implore that only Challcu, Topar, and Nasca bear the punishment, for they alone are guilty."

The aeronaut, as speaker for his party, assured Chasca and his comrades that no fear need be entertained for Antalca. "We know," he declared, "perfectly well who is at the bottom of this movement, and whom to punish. The innocent are safe; even those who have been enticed into the plot shall be given amnesty; only on the arch-conspirator himself shall the vengeance of the gods descend"—this he said at a venture, because an impulse he could not

resist suddenly came upon him; but he had no idea how prophetic were his words.

The three chieftains were delighted with this assurance; and then Haulpa, bending low before the castaways, made another request. It was that the visitors should come to Chochima as his guests on the day before the feast of Raymi, and so be there to witness the ceremonies which were to take place on the little plateau where the castaways landed.

"These ceremonies, as you know," he continued, "occur the following day at dawn, and there will be ample time for you to see them and then return to the white city before noon, the hour for your proposed test."

This invitation the professor deemed it wise to accept, and accordingly did so for himself and his companions. When the curacas had left

them alone again, he said: -

"How impossible it is to remove the feeling from even these natives' minds that we are from their sun-god, although we have tried to explain our way of coming and the wonders of our own land to them! We may as well give it up, and allow them to believe it as long as they will. But on account of this trip to Chochima, we shall be compelled to utilize every moment, in order to finish our arrangement for our escape before we start for that city. There will be no time afterward."

The next two days, therefore, were busy ones for the little party; but on the afternoon of the second, when they set out on their visit to Haulpa, everything was in readiness for them to leave the mountain, should they be permitted to do so. Just before they left the temple, Professor Barton called Admaxla, who was to remain in charge of their apartments, to him and said: -

"My lad, much depends upon you. We shall not be able to return here in time to visit the dome until the very last minute. Should we be delayed, it will be necessary for you to make the trip, and throw the lens out of focus for us. Can you do it?"

"I will try, sire," the boy answered earnestly. "Should you not be here by the time the people begin to assemble for the service, I will climb up the tower, and if possible carry out your command."

"I know you will, when you realize that my life may depend upon your act," said the aeronaut gravely, and shaking the youth's hand warmly; then he joined his companions in the corridor.

The journey to the eastern part of the plateau

was accomplished in safety, and the castaways were hospitably received by the curaca of Chochima. A good night's rest was enjoyed, notwithstanding the trying ordeal of the coming day, for all the party were weary from the strenuous exertions of the last two days. At an early hour in the morning they were aroused, and, after a hasty lunch, set forth for the scene of the great festival.

As the litters of Haulpa and his friends were borne down the great road to the cliff, they were everywhere greeted with shouts of joy and acts of homage. In each town and hamlet along the path the dwellings were decorated with brilliant flowers, while at every post-house

gay flags were unfurled to the breeze.

On reaching the shepherds' hamlet where the castaways had first been entertained, the company left their litters and made a short visit upon the old headsman. Each of the aeronauts thanked him in turn for his hospitality, and assured him that it should not be forgotten. The patriarchal native seemed overcome with joy to think the children of the sun should deign to notice him, and could scarcely contain himself.

When they were about to leave the village chief's humble dwelling, Haulpa informed them

that the festal procession was approaching, and waiting until it came up, they would then take their places in it.

The delay was brief, and the visitors were soon watching with great interest the different companies as they passed. First there came a band of small children, dressed in gay colors, and with wreaths of flowers upon their heads. The next throng was composed of youths and maidens clad in pure white, and bearing offerings of fruit and flowers in their hands. Behind them were the vestal virgins chanting sweetly, and swinging their golden vessels filled with Then followed the priests of Choincense. chima in order of rank, closing with the chief ecclesiastic of the city, who was the third religious dignitary in the land, Challcu of the white city and Xauxa of Zoctlan alone outranking him. As he came abreast of the waiting party, walking all alone, Haulpa stepped into the procession beside him, motioning Professor Barton and his comrades to fall in behind. This brought the visitors into the place of highest honor.

In the rear of the great train, but at a respectful distance, came all the inhabitants of the district, a vast throng, making the air resound with their acclamations to the sun-god. The march was continued to the little platform where the airship had been wrecked.

When this was reached, the vanguard of children and youth burst into song, parting, as they sang, into two companies, allowing the virgins and priests to pass between them. These in turn parted, leaving an open laneway down which the chief priest advanced alone, Haulpa and his guests halting at the extreme western edge of the tiny plateau.

In the centre of this opening a small dais had been placed. Mounting this, the ecclesiastic waited until the sun suddenly peeped above the distant horizon, sending its first rays through the opening in the cliff, and so on over the throng and great plateau beyond. Then he raised his hands and began a solemn but beautiful apostrophe to the shining orb, the

giver of light and life to Antalca.

At its close the children and youths advanced and cast their wreaths and offerings of flowers and fruit at the feet of the priest, burying him for a moment within the huge pile. Then bursting suddenly forth from the garlands, as the sun might come forth from a cloud, he hastened over to the waiting curaca and his friends. This was a signal that the return march was to begin, and in reverse order the great procession

set out for Chochima. At the shepherds' hamlet, however, the castaways resumed their litters and, in advance of the train, were borne swiftly off toward the white city.

Not far from ten o'clock they arrived at the lake, and embarked in a light barge which was awaiting them in charge of Chasca. No time was lost in getting away, and the craft was soon nearing the island city.

Then there came suddenly over the waters to the ears of the voyagers a strange, booming sound, unlike anything they had before heard on the mountain top. As it fell upon their ears the oarsmen dropped their blades with a crash, their faces white with alarm, while Chasca rose abruptly from his seat, and gazed with an awed look toward the temple, from which the sound evidently proceeded.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Five times that deep, solemn sound came surging across the intervening space, like a knell of doom. Then all was still again.

The curaca breathed a sigh of relief, but there was a perplexed expression on his face. Motioning to his rowers, however, to resume their oars, he again took his seat; then he said, in answer to the inquiring gaze of his passengers:— "It is the great temple gong. It is used only on the death of a curaca or high priest, tolling seven times for the latter, and nine times for the former. It never struck five notes before, and I do not understand its meaning. But I fear it forbodes some terrible disaster, perhaps to our nation," and he glanced wistfully at the professor.

"It is less than death," replied Mr. Barton, not knowing what else to say, and alluding to

the number of the strokes.

The opinion of Chasca seemed to pervade the crowds on the dock and in the streets, to judge from the expression of their faces as the little party passed among them on their hasty journey to the temple. Here the curaca left his guests, who immediately sought their quarters. There they found Admaxla, his face as he greeted them expressing both concern and amusement.

His first words to Mr. Barton were somewhat

alarming: -

"The high priest has not only visited the dome himself, but has stationed an under priest at the foot of the ladder leading up to the lens. I have been several times up to a point where I could see the fellow, and he was always there. What will you do?"

"Wait," was the response. "Perhaps the guard will be withdrawn just before the service begins. You must be ready to slip up there the moment he departs. If he does not leave soon enough, he must be got out of the way. Can you manage him?"

"I think so. But did you hear the gong sound a half hour ago?" Admaxla now ques-

tioned.

"Yes, what does it mean?" was Rod's eager

inquiry.

"It means that Challcu is already alarmed. He fears that its ringing portends evil to himself. That is why I rang it. You see," he explained, "I knew how to reach the gong, and watching my opportunity, struck it five times, and then slipped away unobserved. The priests, with the old chief at their head, came running immediately to see who had sounded the alarm, and finding no one about, went back to their apartments greatly mystified. All believe it to be an evil omen," and the lad laughed merrily.

"God grant that it be not an evil omen to

us!" ejaculated Mr. Todd, fervently.

But there was no opportunity for further talk, as it was already time for the castaways to descend to the audience room. With a last word to Admaxla to be faithful to his trust,

they left him, and with anxious hearts went down the broad stairs.

As they entered the great hall below, they found it filled to overflowing. In fact, through the vestibule, down the steps, and out into the park, the crowd extended. The whole city was there, and many had come from across the lake to witness the testing of the strangers; for the wily Challcu had taken care that the fact should be known throughout the land. If he won the victory, he meant to have it as great as possible.

Within the railing stood the high priest, but the altar had been moved back a short distance, and in its place was a small circular mat, to which Professor Barton was led. There he stood, not only in the dress, but with the air of a king, while a confident smile lit up his noble countenance. In their accustomed positions outside the barrier stood the other castaways.

There was a moment or two of waiting, in which the hearts of the four aeronauts, notwithstanding their calm demeanor, beat anxiously. Would Admaxla be able to reach the dome and swing the great burning glass out of its place in time? They must wait and see.

In upon their thoughts came the sound of the golden horn announcing the hour of noon. Challeu advanced, and raising his hands, prayed

the sun-god to decide between his true priest and the accursed stranger. Then the scarlet curtains up in the dome parted, but no answer-

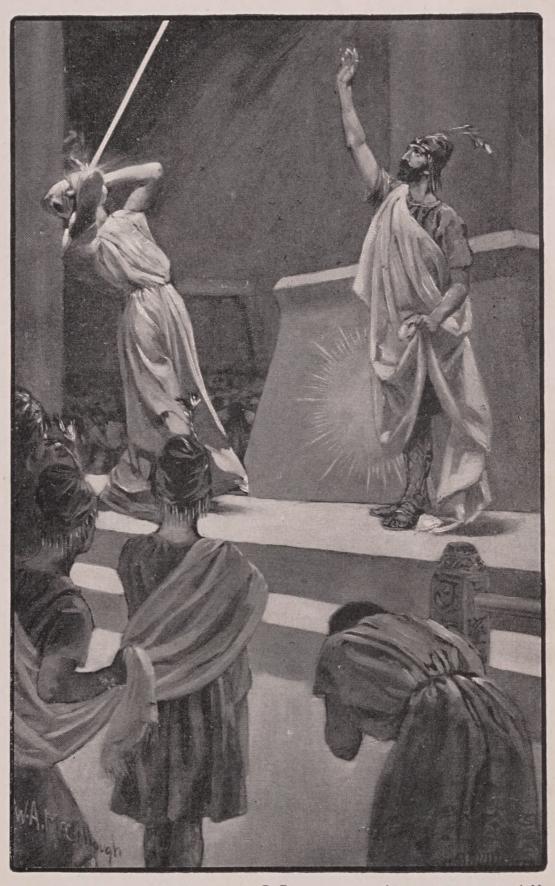
ing flash of light came down the shaft.

There was a moment's pause, during which the old ecclesiastic strove manfully to conceal his alarm and chagrin that no flame had come at his call; then once more he raised his hands and, with a loud voice, besought the sun to vindicate his votary. At the same instant Professor Barton was seen to raise his own hand above his head, as though making an appeal in his own behalf.

Again the curtains rolled back, and this time down from the roof that swift, blinding ray came. Straight toward the uplifted face of Challeu it darted, striking him fairly in the eyes.

With a wild despairing cry, "Oh, Viraco-cha! My sight! My sight!" the priest dropped at the aeronaut's feet, while the great throng fell to the paved floor as dead men.

¹The Quichuan name for the sun-god.



"My sight! my sight!"



CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TREASURE HOUSE.

For an instant Professor Barton was so startled by the unexpected occurrence that he was at loss how to act; but it was only for an instant. Then stepping quickly forward, he said in clear, distinct tones,—

"The gods have spoken!" and he dismissed them with the usual Antalcan benediction.

In awe-stricken silence the multitude slowly left the building, with the exception of Chasca and Tupac, who had come to the white city to witness the outcome of the high priest's plan. They stood beside Mr. Todd and the lads, waiting for some command from the professor, for they felt he was now the head of the priesthood, and could alone tell them what to do. For perhaps the same reason, the under priests of the temple also kept their places, staring in horror at their fallen leader, who still lay senseless before the aeronaut.

The situation was becoming a trifle embar-

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rassing, when Rod leaped the rail and lifted up the head of the injured man. Then he said to Mr. Barton in low tones, speaking in English:—

"The old priest is alive, professor. Act as though in supreme authority here, and bid the attendants move him to his apartments. They

will never touch him until you do."

His friend nodded, and the next minute called out sternly for the temple officials to come forward and bear Challeu to his room. They obeyed with surprising alacrity, and, telling his comrades he would join them later in their own quarters, the aeronaut, accompanied by the two curacas, followed the disappearing priests.

As the other three castaways reached the head of the staircase leading into the corridor, they met Admaxla, who was hastening toward the vestibule. At sight of them he halted, inquiring anxiously:—

"Where is the professor? Is he safe?"

"Oh, yes!" responded Rod, promptly, "but Challcu is not," and he hurriedly explained what had happened in the audience room below. They had reached their own apartments before he had finished, and after making sure there was no one within hearing, he asked,—

"Did you have any trouble in climbing up to the dome, Admaxla?"

"No," the native lad replied; "though I had to hasten, as the priest who was on guard did not leave until just before the horn sounded. I ran up the ladder as soon as he was out of the way and swung the lens out of focus. I was just in time, for the next instant the curtains parted. When they rolled back into place again I saw that I had in my haste turned the glass nearly over, and decided to drop it back into a horizontal position. Before I could do so, the curtains, to my surprise, were thrown open a second time. I held the lens right where it was, but it was level enough to let the ray pass down. For a moment I was frightened, fearing that Mr. Barton might be hurt; then I concluded the flame could not have struck where he was standing, and so felt easier about the mishap. Still I was too anxious about the matter to remain there, and as soon as I could adjust the glass, hurried down here. Fortunately I met no one. Surely, the gods must have guided my hands so as to bring vengeance upon the high priest."

It was not long before the aeronaut returned, bringing Tupac and Chasca with him. Todd

immediately inquired: —

"How is Challeu, professor? Is he seriously hurt? Or don't you know?"

"He will never see again, I fear," was the grave reply. "That dazzling ray of sunlight has, I think, completely destroyed his sight; but we shall know certainly by to-morrow. He is in a high fever, brought on by the shock, and in his delirium raves continually against Chasca, Tupac, Admaxla, and ourselves. His hatred for us all is simply appalling; but his enmity seems especially bitter against the lad. In fact, I am confident from his mutterings that he captured Admaxla with the deliberate purpose of putting him to death, and will yet, should he be able, take the boy's life."

"Why cannot Admaxla go home with us?" exclaimed Rod, impulsively. "He will be safe there, and can learn many things which will be of use to him when he comes to take his father's place. After three or four years he can return, and will be able to do much for his land because of his trip to the States."

"A capital idea! a most excellent one!" admitted Mr. Barton, heartily. Then turning to Admaxla's father, he said in the native language, for Rod had spoken in English,—

"How would you like to have your son

accompany us to our land, and there prepare himself to rule over his people?"

For a moment the curaca seemed almost stunned by this amazing proposition. His boy go with the children of the sun, and see all the wonders of which they had spoken! The heir of Zoctlan and the white city to be trained in all the wisdom of the gods! Could there be such good fortune for the houses of Tupac and Chasca?

"Oh, sire! It cannot be you are in earnest?" he stammered at length. "It is too great an honor for the son of Tupac to receive."

"No; I am in earnest," responded the pro-fessor. "We will gladly take him with us should you and Chasca consent, for I do not forget that the interest which the curaca of the white city has in the lad is scarcely less than your own," and the speaker nodded pleasantly toward Tupac's brother-in-law, who had not yet recovered from his astonishment at the aeronaut's unexpected proposal. "It will not only take Admaxla out of the reach of his enemies for a while, but will also give the boy a prestige and power never possessed by an Antalcan ruler."

"If the lad is willing to go, we shall be ready to give our consent," the delighted curacas

exclaimed simultaneously.

"Of course I am willing to go," Admaxla at once asserted.

For the remainder of the afternoon the friends discussed the matter, going fully into all its details, and Professor Barton tried to make clear to the boy and to the listening chieftains what it would mean for Admaxla to spend a few years in the United States. He said:—

"He shall learn how to write his spoken words on paper, as you have seen us do; how to transmit his thoughts in an instant from the white city to every part of the mountain plateau; how to use the secret power by which boats can glide about your lake without sails or oars, and great litters on wheels can run along your paved roads. He shall become familiar with new ways of making your cloth, of using your metals, of tilling your fields, and of constructing your buildings,—ways that shall greatly lighten the labors of your people. He shall be taught new truths of God, and principles of right living, that shall uplift his nation. He shall with his knowledge transform the whole land."

The lad himself seemed to be most pleased that he was not to be separated from his new friends and should see the many things of which Rod and Todd had told him; but his father and uncle apparently realized, to some extent at least, how valuable the proposed trip would be, not merely to Admaxla, but to all Antalca. It was decided, therefore, that the strangers should take the boy with them.

At the close of the long conference Chasca thoughtfully inquired whether there were not some things Admaxla would need to carry with

him on his long journey.

"Yes," Professor Barton assented; "and there is another matter of which I would here speak. It will be well for the lad to learn from his grandfather the exact location of the nation's buried treasure, that he may bring it with him on his return."

Both curacas held up their hands in wonder and surprise.

"He will need a retinue of a hundred stalwart carriers," they cried. "Then, too, how can

he scale the cliffs with the great load?"

The aeronaut smiled. "It shall be done," he said; and such was the faith of the chiefs in him they questioned no further, but gave a ready assent to the suggestion. Then Chasca said:—

"I will call in the morning, and we will go to the treasure house, where you will select such things as Admaxla may need. I also desire that each of you, my friends, shall choose whatever you may like best among the stores there as an offering from our people. Tupac, Haulpa, and myself had already agreed to this, and it was arranged that I was to speak to you of it before your departure."

"It is a kindness we appreciate," the professor responded, "and one I trust that neither myself nor my comrades will abuse." Then the

long and important interview closed.

While it was in progress, however, a new idea had come into Rod's mind, one which he decided to communicate privately to Mr. Barton. This he did some hours later with a result that brought astonishment to the whole land on the following day.

As the hour for the evening service drew near, the professor sought out Chasca and abruptly inquired:—

"Who will conduct the ceremonies to-night?

Of course Challcu cannot."

"I presume an under priest will take the chief's place, if you so direct," was the answer.

Professor Barton thought a moment. It was evident that the curaca, and probably the entire priesthood, looked upon him as the religious head of the nation now that the high priest was stricken; and doubtless they would make

no movement toward a new chief until some command came from him. His decision, there-

fore, was promptly made.

"I will take charge myself this evening," he said. "In the meantime will you send word to Xauxa to come here before noon to-morrow? Your people must have a new high priest before I depart."

As though the announcement was precisely what he had expected, Chasca bowed an assent and at once sent a courier to Zoctlan. Then he and the aeronaut crossed over to the temple, where the worshippers were already gathering. An under priest was in Challcu's place, but at a word from the tall stranger he stepped aside. Waiting only until the signal for the service had been given, Professor Barton said:—

"Your high priest is unable to officiate tonight. Indeed, he will never be able to resume his duties again. To-morrow Xauxa, the priest of Zoctlan, will be installed in his place. You are dismissed," and wondering greatly, the congregation slowly left the building. In the morning the professor made a similar announcement, adding that the installation of the new religious executive would occur at the noon hour.

Scarcely had the castaways eaten their

breakfast, when Chasca called at their apartments, asking if they were ready to go with him to the treasury.

A walk of three or four minutes brought the visiting party to the building, which faced the park opposite the west side of the temple. The huge structure was without a window, and appeared not unlike a fortress. A soldier was on guard at the gateway, but he allowed Chasca and his friends to pass unchallenged. Unlocking the metal door with a key that he took from his girdle, the curaca led the way through a long passage to a small court at the very heart of the building. From this court a dozen heavily barred doors opened into as many chambers, which the chief said contained the reserve arms, the unused accumulations of cloth and grain, and the other bulky resources of the state.

In the centre of the court was a large metal trap door. To this Chasca now went, and, throwing it open, disclosed a broad flight of steps leading down into the darkness. Lighting a small lamp which he had brought for this part of the trip, the curaca started down the stairway, calling for his companions to follow him.

At the bottom of the stairway was another

door of metal which was speedily opened. The castaways now found themselves in a room about fifteen feet square, hewn out of the solid rock, and bare of any ornamentation. About three sides, at a distance of about four feet from the floor, ran a broad shelf upon which were three dozen golden basins, each about a foot in diameter. Motioning them to approach, their guide held his lamp above the nearest dish, revealing to their astonished eyes a quart or more of flashing jewels. Slowly they made the round of the room, finding that each bowl contained a like amount of the precious stones, the only difference being the color of the gems. Some sparkled and flashed with the brilliancy of the diamond, some gave forth the hue of the emerald, and others the deep color of the ruby. The space beneath the shelves was filled with bars of gold, while in the centre of the apartment was a mound of the same metal, nearly eight feet square and as high as Rod's head. The chamber contained the ransom of a nation.

After the visitors had seen all the treasures Chasca turned to Professor Barton, saying:—

"Now, sire, take as many of these gems as you think Admaxla will need in the land to which he is going. We wish him to be able

to live in the style befitting his rank. Be not afraid to select all that may be necessary for that purpose, for nearly one-half of the whole will belong to the lad when Tupac and I are gone, as a law of the nation gives to each curaca one-fifth of the entire contents of the treasure house."

Thus directed, Mr. Barton selected a handful of the largest and purest gems, and showing them to the chief, responded: -

"These will be amply sufficient for the lad's

needs, I am confident."

The native seemed surprised at the small number selected, but nodded his assent, and then remarked: -

"I also wish each of you to take something as a gift from the Antalcan nation. Take that which pleases you most."

The castaways knew it was wiser to accept the offering, and so in turn chose each a single jewel, at the same time thanking the curaca warmly in behalf of the givers.

Chasca then led the way back to the upper court and opened one of the doors leading from

it.

"This room," he said, "contains the bows and arrows, the next holds the shields, a third the spears, a fourth the swords, of the nation.

Since the civil war in my grandfather's time, these arms have been stored here and are ready for use at a moment's notice. They are sufficient to equip all the able-bodied men of this city, and of the loyal districts of Zoctlan and Chochima. Every male over eighteen and under sixty is required to practise their use for a period of thirty days in each year under official instruction. Thus are we prepared to put down another uprising of Arauco and Haurina."

As he ceased speaking, they entered the apartment. On every wall were great racks from which hung thousands of the native bows, while large stands held numberless quivers filled with the necessary arrows. At the suggestion of the chieftain, Rod and Todd selected two bows and their complement of arrows for their own use, and a third set of the primitive weapons for the native lad, who had trained them to be fair archers, but who had left the evening before with his father for Zoctlan, where the aeronauts were to join him.

In the room where the swords were stored the manufacturer and the professor were supplied each with a keen blade. Chasca desired them to make a selection suited to their rank, pointing out weapons whose hilts blazed with gold and precious stones. But the castaways strenuously insisted on equipping themselves with the plainest of the implements, deeming them likely to be more serviceable — a choice to which the chief reluctantly consented.

In a third store-room a plain suit of dark blue was selected as the most fitting garb for Admaxla to travel in, and then, laden with their spoils, the little band returned to the temple.

CHAPTER XXI.

STARTLING INFORMATION.

When the aeronauts again reached their rooms, the professor left his comrades to make a call upon the stricken high priest. He was not gone long, and on his return reported that dignitary to be in about the same condition as on the previous evening. There was much inflammation in his eyes, and he had a high fever, resulting from the shock and the intense pain he was suffering. It was certain he would never see again; and his hatred for the strangers and their friends still found vent in his ravings. Clearly in him Tupac and his family had a lifelong enemy.

Mr. Barton had barely finished this report when Xauxa, the priest of Zoctlan, was announced. This ecclesiastic was a cousin of Tupac, and a man of great ability and most excellent character. Approaching the aeronaut,

he bowed humbly before him, saying, -

"You have sent for me, sire, and I am here."

The professor motioned for him to rise and replied:—

"It is well. You have been informed of the

fate of Challcu?"

The priest nodded, and then the speaker continued:—

"By a law of your land, he, being permanently disabled, can never again resume his official duties; but even if he were able, it is not meet that such a man should be high priest of the Antalcan nation. As you are next in rank, I have sent for you, and you shall to-day be installed in your new office."

Here he paused and looked inquiringly at the native to ascertain his own will in the

matter.

Xauxa bowed reverently, simply saying: "It is as you will, sire."

Then the aeronaut went on, -

"If you will come with me, I will make known to you the secret of the sacred fire."

With a look of wonder on his face, the man

complied.

First leading him down into the great audience chamber, Mr. Barton showed him that a pressure of his foot upon a small round stone in front of the altar would throw back the scarlet curtains way up in the dome, and explained

how, by an adjustment of light cords running up within the walls of the building, this was accomplished.

"We will now go up to the tower itself," the

professor then said.

Through the corridors to the concealed stairway he conducted the priest, and on up the ladders to the parapet at the top of the shaft. There he pointed out the huge lens, and by throwing it out of and into place, gave his pupil a practical illustration of its adjustments and its possibilities. The keen wits of Xauxa soon took in the entire mechanism, and turning to his companion with a twinkle in his eye, he pronounced the one word,—

"Humbug!"

An amused smile played over the face of the aeronaut as he said:—

"Not altogether! The sun will really light the sacrificial pile with help from the officiating priest. It is an impressive way to start the fire, and has, of course, its influence upon the people."

The character of the new head of the priest-

hood was instantly revealed.

"I detest fraud," he said simply and yet with an emphasis that was genuine. "We have too much of it in our sacred order already." "Perhaps you may be able to do away with it to some extent, now you are in the chief religious office," suggested the professor. "How grand to lead your people to a faith that recognizes not the sun, but He who is back of the sun, back of all things, the great Giver of all life!"

For an instant the man stood as though absorbed with what was to him a new thought. Then he said earnestly, "I shall try."

They now descended the stairs, and when in the corridor below Professor Barton remarked:

"The other secrets of the temple will be made known to you by your assistants. You may now go and put on the garments of the high priest, with the exception of the mitre. Have two of the under priests bring that in upon a silver charger. Be within the altar rail at least five minutes before the sound of the horn, that I may induct you into your office in time for you to take upon yourself your official duties at the noon sacrifice."

The native assented, and then went his way to the priestly quarters, while the professor joined his comrades.

When the people assembled in the temple an hour later they found Professor Barton standing in Challcu's place before the altar, while

Xauxa, clothed in the vestments of the high priest, but with bare head, stood a few feet to the right. Then taking the mitre from the two men, who at a signal brought the jewelled head-piece forward, the aeronaut held it up before the throng and asked,—

"Is it your will, O people of Antalca, that I now set apart Xauxa of Zoctlan to be your

high priest?"

There was a moment's hush, and then there went up a shout that made the great edifice tremble:—

"It is! It is!"

Turning instantly to the waiting ecclesiastic, the professor placed it upon his head, declaring:

"By this act I appoint you, Xauxa, to be the high priest of this people;" and he motioned him to take his place before the altar and conduct the usual service.

The newly created dignitary obeyed, and when the sacred fire fell upon the altar, kindling the waiting offering, the audience burst into a loud acclaim at this manifest approval of the sungod. Here Mr. Barton stepped forward once more, and raising his hand for silence, made an announcement startling to all present, with the exception of Rod, to whom it was due. He said:—

"Long years ago the nation from which your fathers came was overthrown by a strange people, and their Incas were destroyed. The young Inca, who was intrusted to your ancestors, also perished by the way, and there was no one left, of the direct royal line, to rule over you. But now a solution of the unhappy dilemma has been found. In Admaxla and Tara, who are already betrothed, the purest blood of the ancient Incas will be united; and through them, after years of waiting, it is decreed that you shall again have a throne and an Inca.

"With the rising sun, the strangers who have been your nation's guests will leave the land. The son of Tupac will go with them, and in their land learn of their magic and wisdom, that he may become a fit ruler for his people. Five years from to-day he shall return to you, bringing the buried treasure of your fathers, and equipped with great power to begin his rule

over you as the first Inca of Antalca."

While the aeronaut was speaking, the astonished natives listened in silent awe. But as he finished, they fell prostrate to the floor, and for the third time since their arrival on the mountain top, the castaways heard the cry:—

"The gods have come down to us! The

gods have come down to us!"

As the shout died away, Xauxa lifted his hands toward heaven, and in beautiful language thanked the Giver of all life for the promised blessing, and then dismissed the assemblage.

The curaca of the white city waited for the castaways and went with them to their rooms. Here they found one of the under priests awaiting their coming, evidently with some important communication. Chasca, quickly noting his grave face, addressed him,—

"Well, Oello, what is it now?" he questioned.

"I have something to say to you and the Inca alone," was the startling reply, as Oello

bowed before the professor.

"Come with us," the chieftain directed, leading the way to the farther end of the apartment. There he said, "Tell us your message quickly,

for we are in haste to leave the city."

"Sire," began the man, turning to Professor Barton and speaking in a low voice, "will you give me your word that no one shall know by what means you obtained the secret I now disclose?"

"Certainly," the professor responded readily,

though somewhat puzzled by the request.

"Thanks, sire," Oello went on. "It would mean death to me should it become known that I had told you. But I believe that you are the

friend, not the foe, of our land, and so tell you this: Topar and Nasca are plotting to attack your party with an armed force this afternoon while on your way to Zoctlan and slay you all."

For a moment both his hearers were too amazed by his revelation to make any comment.

Then Chasca exclaimed: -

"It cannot be true! They would never dare to attack me out of their own districts! You must be mistaken!"

"No," insisted the priest, "it is as I have said. They plan to assail you with a large force, and hope by taking you when off your guard to quickly destroy you all."

"How do you know this?" demanded the

aeronaut, sharply.

"I heard them making their plans, sire," Oello replied promptly.

"Explain yourself more fully," Chasca com-

manded.

"This morning a courier came bearing a message for Topar, who, as you know, has remained here since the judgment of the gods upon his uncle, Challcu," said the priest. "I conducted the messenger to his apartment and by a sudden impulse waited outside the doorway to hear what the courier would say. These were his words,—

"'Your orders have been obeyed, and the five hundred soldiers are at the appointed

place.'

"Topar replied, 'It is well.' Then turning to Nasca, who was with him, he went on: 'We will leave in an hour, and unless our plans fail, should be able to intercept Chasca and those accursed strangers at the place arranged. They will be completely surprised, and we shall make short work of them.'

"I waited a moment longer, but heard nothing which gave me any clew to the place where the attack is to be made. Then I stole quietly away, and as soon as possible came here to bring you the tidings."

Professor Barton had watched the man keenly during his recital and was convinced that he spoke the truth. So when the priest ceased, he

turned to Chasca, saying decidedly: -

"I believe it is as he says. We must prepare

ourselves to defeat Topar."

The curaca assented doubtfully. He could not understand how the ruler of Arauco dared to attack him, an act which would plunge the whole nation into a civil war. But his confidence in the professor's judgment was so great, he turned to Oello, asking,—

"Can you tell us anything more?"

"I have withheld nothing," was the positive answer.

"Very well, you may go; and, Oello, you will not lose by this act. The strangers will not forget it, nor will I," and Chasca dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

When he had left the room, Mr. Barton turned to the curaca with the inquiry:—

"What are your plans? Have you thought

of any way to thwart Topar's purpose?"

"Yes," the chieftain replied. "There are one thousand men in the city garrison and two hundred and fifty more in the station across the lake at the great pier where the road from Zoctlan touches the shore. I will take all the force there and an equal number from the troops here as an escort. That will give us as large a force as Topar has, and I believe that when he finds his attack is not going to be a surprise, he will withdraw without giving us battle. Should he be so rash as to make an engagement, we shall defeat him, for my soldiers are the best disciplined in Antalca."

"Very good," commented the aeronaut; "and now I will acquaint my companions with the situation."

"And I will go at once and order out the

troops," said Chasca. "I will return here for you soon, however," and he left the room.

Mr. Todd and the two lads had overheard enough of the conversation to know that some secret plot of the enemy had been discovered, but were ignorant of its precise nature. Therefore they anxiously waited for the professor to tell them just what had been learned. This he did in a very few words. The alarm the little party felt was plainly depicted on their faces, and the manufacturer asked apprehensively,—

"What are our chances of coming safely through this scrimmage, should it occur, pro-

fessor?"

"I don't know," was the frank response. "It all depends on how these natives fight. But we must be prepared to defend ourselves as best we can with the rude weapons we have, trusting in the same kind Providence which has cared for us so many times, to lead us through this danger."

The castaways were still discussing this new

complication when Chasca returned.

"I have made all the necessary arrangements," he announced. "The troops will be in waiting when we reach the other side. If you are ready, we will now go down to the litters."

With a last glance about the rooms which

had been so long a pleasant and comfortable home to them, the aeronauts gathered up their personal effects and handed them over to the serving men who were in waiting. Then they went forth to face an experience so new and uncertain not one of them could predict its outcome.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FINAL EFFORT.

The plot made known by the temple servitor had been arranged with all the subtlety of desperate men who knew they were making their last move against the hated visitors. Well aware that on its success or failure their own fortunes would rise or fall, they took every precaution to conceal their plan until its sudden execution would render their defeat impossible; and it was under the roof of the sacred structure which gave shelter to the castaways that they arranged the details of their daring scheme.

When Challeu sank down senseless upon the pavement at Professor Barton's feet, stricken by the ray he had invoked for the other's doom, Topar and Nasca were among the awe-stricken witnesses of his fate. Both curacas had come up to the white city that morning for the express purpose of witnessing the outcome of the old ecclesiastic's test. The result was so startling

that for a moment each one was too astonished for rational thought, and when the audience dispersed, they too passed out and went to the rooms assigned them as Challcu's guests.

Here, after a time, they somewhat recovered themselves, and their natural hatred for the strangers returned in full force. Topar left his confederate and made a call upon his uncle, finding that the aeronaut had just left him, and that he was suffering intensely from his injury. Convinced that he could do nothing for the sick man, he returned to his chamber, to find Nasca pacing up and down the floor in a rage, and calling down curses upon the heads of the castaways.

"Must we tamely submit to the mandates of these interfering visitors?" he exclaimed, as the curaca of Arauco entered the apartment. "Can we not in some way avenge the insults and the injuries which have been heaped upon the high

priest?"

"I do not know," was the sullen reply. "I am as anxious as yourself for revenge, but all our efforts so far have been thwarted by the strangers, who go calmly on as if nothing had occurred. They seem to know our most secret thoughts, to have the power to intercept and turn to naught all our undertakings. Some-

times I fear them, and wish they would go; and again I hate them, and long to see them all dashed down the mountain side."

"Bah!" retorted the other, "they are but men. All their success is due to some underhanded way in which they have learned of our movements, and to the dastardly tricks they have employed to hoodwink our people. Let us make one more effort, and strike before the visitors can learn of our plans. We will give them no chance to prepare for the emergency, and then we shall see if they are so superior to us."

Topar was silent a few minutes, as though carefully weighing the suggestion of his colleague in all its parts; then he answered:—

"Very well; let us do so. But we must make sure that our plans are so carefully laid they cannot fail, as they did when my uncle and I attempted to kidnap Admaxla. No one in all the white city but ourselves must know of our purpose. Our helpers must be found across the lake in Arauco and Haurina."

There was silence for a few moments, broken at length by Nasca, who said:—

"Let us once more bring forth the standard of Arauco, and wage war to the death with these intruders and their friends. My forces shall join yours, and if our first blow be struck in the dark, success may attend our arms. Then these haughty families who have for the last century held an iron hand over our districts will be brought low, and we shall recover all our fathers lost. What say you?"

For an instant Topar hesitated. Then he

replied: -

"I am with you. Ever have the houses of Arauco and Haurina united against the other provinces, and once more will we do so. But when, and how, shall the blow be struck?"

"That I do not know as yet," was the answer. "First let us prepare to strike the blow. The opportunity will come if once we are prepared for it. Do you send an order for one-half of your forces to march to-night to the post at the point where the great road from your city reaches the lake, bringing with them the yellow flag of your house. I will order an equal number of my troops to the same place. That will give us five hundred men ready to use at a moment's notice. Nor will Chasca or his friends be likely to learn of their assembling, for our people are all loyal and true."

"I will do as you suggest," assented his companion; "and meanwhile we will keep watch of the visitors, to learn all we can of their in-

tended movements. I have two trusty men with me, who will carry our orders at once. By morning we should receive word that they have been obeyed," and he left the room in search of his messengers.

When the two plotters heard that evening the professor's announcement that Xauxa was to be installed in the place of the injured high priest, their wrath once more found vent in furious words.

"It is high time something was done," stormed Nasca. "A little longer, and these meddling strangers will be deposing you and me, that they may appoint members of Chasca's family to our places."

"Say rather," interposed his comrade, "that they will depose us all and proclaim themselves rulers over our land; for that is what they will do in time, unless they are put out of the way."

"We have arranged our plans none too soon, in any case," declared the other; "and we must make our next move at the very first opportunity. I trust there will be no delay, and that we shall receive word early to-morrow that our troops are at the appointed place."

Immediately after the morning service the following day Topar made a call on his uncle.

He returned greatly excited.

"Our chance has come sooner than we expected," he announced exultingly. "I have just learned that the strangers leave immediately after the noon service for Zoctlan. Doubtless they will go, as usual, unattended, save by Chasca and the bearers. Now is our time.

"You will remember the little bridge where the road from Arauco to Zoctlan crosses the river forming the boundary between Tupac's territory and my own, about three-quarters of a mile from the lake shore? A few rods beyond this runs the broad highway from Zoctlan to the lake. Well, we will leave here as soon as we receive word that our troops have assembled at the appointed rendezvous, and join them. From there we will march to that bridge, and wait until just before the hour for the strangers to reach that point in their journey. Then we will cross the river and conceal ourselves behind the thick hedges which border the road at that spot. When Chasca's party approaches we will suddenly surround them, and I've no doubt, taken by surprise and unarmed, we shall have no difficulty in slaying them all. If we do so, there will be a natural reaction in our favor, and it will only remain for us to use the returning tide to restore our houses to their old prestige and power."

"The plan is a good one, with a few slight exceptions," commented Nasca. "Will not the people thereabout give the alarm? And how can you be sure of the time when Chasca will arrive?"

"I had thought of both those objections," returned Topar. "As to the first, there will hardly be time for an alarm to be given, for we will not cross into Tupac's district until just before the time for our attack. While if Chasca and his friends leave here immediately after the noon service, it will be about an hour before they can reach the place of our ambush. If we base our own movements on that, we shall not be far out of the way. So all now depends on word from the troops. It should have been here before—"

Here the speaker was interrupted by a knock at the door, and the expected messenger was ushered into the room. He reported that the five hundred men were in waiting, as ordered, and the curaca of Arauco exclaimed,—

"It is well!" Then turning to Nasca he went on: "We will leave in an hour, and unless our plans miscarry, should be able to intercept Chasca and those accursed strangers at the place arranged. They will be completely surprised, and we will make short work of them."

A few more questions were asked the courier about the assembled troops, and then he was dismissed. After he had disappeared, Nasca inquired in low tones:—

"You are positive, Topar, that no one has learned of our plot; there has been no way in which the visitors could hear of it, and so come

prepared to resist us?"

"None!" was the positive reply. "No one but ourselves and the man who has just left us knows of the massing of our soldiers; and even the courier does not know why they have been brought together. The troops do not themselves know why they are assembled. The purpose is locked up in your bosom and mine; and whom have we told of it? How can any one even suspect our plan?"

"True," his comrade assented, with satisfaction; "but would it not be well to leave some one here to send us word, in case the visitors

should take a large escort with them?"

"You are over-cautious," retorted his companion, impatiently. "What good would it do? He could not reach us before Chasca did, and then I am sure there is no danger of such a thing. Besides, if they take troops with them, it will be but a small number; nothing like the force we shall have."

There was a little more discussion, and then the two men left the room. Within an hour they entered their litters and were borne swiftly to the water side, where their barges were in waiting. They embarked in these, and were soon across the lake at the great pier on the Araucan shore.

The small military post at this point was situated but a short distance from the lake side, and was an unpretending one; for since the civil war the Araucan ruler had been allowed to keep only fifty men there. To this fort the curacas were carried, and found within the two bands of soldiers they had ordered to meet them. These were the pick of the two little armies of the districts, and bore the banner of the house of Arauco—a yellow flag emblazoned with a red llama. Without alighting from their litters, the two chiefs called the commanders of the waiting troops to them, and issued a few brief orders. Then the rear gates of the enclosure were opened, and the men filed out, Nasca and Topar in the rear.

The line of march lay directly away from the lake for a third of a mile, and then nearly parallel to its shores for the remainder of the trip. Whatever the inhabitants along the way may have thought of the large body of soldiers, no

excitement was manifest. It was evidently as Topar had said, they would not circulate any report which could come to Chasca's ears.

An hour later, or just after noon, the marching column reached the banks of the small stream separating the two districts. There was a small grove on the Araucan side of the river, and in this the troops were concealed until the time should come for them to cross the bridge. Forty-five minutes passed, and then Topar, who with Nasca's consent was acting as commanderin-chief, ordered his forces to advance. As soon as the last man was across the river, however, he halted them a moment, and sent one of the under officers on ahead to reconnoitre. He returned shortly, reporting that no one was in sight, and so the troops moved on to the point where the cross-road they were following met the great road to Zoctlan, along which the strangers were to come.

Both thoroughfares were here lined with thick hedges five or six feet in height, and dividing the little army into two equal bodies, the curaca stationed one of them under Nasca in the field to the east of the by-path, while the second he posted in the meadow to the west, taking charge of them in person. Nasca had orders to wait until the professor and his party

had passed; then he was to attack them in the rear, while Topar would lead the charge in front at the same moment. These preparations completed, a scout was sent down the main road a short distance, to announce the approach of the intended victims.

Fifteen minutes elapsed, and then Nasca came over where Topar was, greatly excited.

"The courier has just returned with a report that Chasca is advancing at the head of a considerable body of armed men," he announced. "What shall we do?"

"I will go over to your station and see for myself," his confederate replied, striving to conceal his own misgivings.

Stealthily crossing the road the two curacas crept behind the hedges down to the place where Nasca's men were awaiting the attack. From there a fair view could be obtained of the approaching party.

It was as the scout had declared. A strong force of men were marching up the highway.

For an instant the two chiefs gazed at the coming men in alarm. Then the curaca of Arauco burst forth:—

"It is nothing but a guard of honor for the visitors. They would not move along so unconcernedly if they suspected our presence.

Let us make the attack as we planned. We may as well strike now as any time. Do your part, and I'll do mine, and may the gods give us the victory!"

Then he went back to his own troops, while Nasca with confident heart awaited his share in

the coming struggle.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN OVERWHELMING DEFEAT.

When the castaways left the temple they followed Chasca across to the palace, in whose courtyard five litters were in waiting (for Tara and her mother had accompanied Admaxla and Tupac to Zoctlan on the previous day). In these they quickly took their places, and in a moment more were again in the park. As the bearers turned into one of the broad avenues leading down to the quay, the four Americans glanced back for a parting view of the majestic building which had come to seem almost a home to them. With its great golden dome towering heavenward and glistening in the sunlight, it seemed to be wishing them a hearty but silent godspeed.

Soon park, temple, and surrounding palaces were all left behind, and the litters came down upon the broad wharf. After the travellers had taken their seats in the waiting barge, and it had commenced its trip across the lake, Chasca turned to the professor, saying:—

"I have been thinking of Topar's intended attack. Should he really make such an assault as Oello reported, there is but one spot he would be likely to choose. It is three-fourths of a mile from the lake shore, at a point where a cross-road from his district joins the main highway we are to follow.

"I think you will remember the place. There are dense hedges on both sides of the path, and no dwelling within a quarter of a mile. He can easily conceal his men behind the hedge-rows, and a sudden attack at such a place could have but one result, were we not prepared for it."

"You think he will give up the attempt when he finds it will not be a surprise?" queried the

professor.

"I do," the curaca replied. "But even should he give battle, I believe we can easily defeat his forces; for, as I have already said, my troops are the best trained and bravest in the land. And then, are not you and your companions with us?"

The aeronaut smiled at the last words, but made no reply. He did not care to let Chasca know his real feelings, for he had grave doubts as to the outcome of the coming struggle. There was but one thing to do, however, and that was to go on and meet the enemy with a brave front.

The remainder of the passage was made in silence, and ten minutes later the barge came alongside the pier. Here the soldiers were drawn up to receive them in two ranks, and the little party passed up the wharf between the lines. Litters were in waiting, but the lads objected to using them.

"Let us walk with the troops," Rod said, "until after the fight is over. We may need the litters then. But I don't care to be where

I can't defend myself when attacked."

The chieftain demurred at first, but finally consented. Then he issued a few orders, and the troops formed in marching column, five abreast. Professor Barton could but admit, as he watched their movements, that they were a fine set of men, and well drilled.

Five minutes later the column was in motion, Chasca and his guests at its head, the litters having been sent to the rear. They marched slowly, and it was not until twenty minutes had passed that they neared the point of the expected attack. Then Chasca halted the troops and turned to Professor Barton.

"Sire," he said, "we are now, in my judgment, close upon Topar and his men. I believe they will be in two bands, one this side of the cross-road, the other beyond it. I suggest, therefore,

that we divide our own forces, and make a double attack upon them before they leave their hiding-places. The first half shall go directly on and strike the farther division of the enemy, while the second shall attack those in waiting this side of the by-path. Does this meet your approval?"

The aeronaut quickly comprehended the curaca's plan, and realized that by attacking, instead of waiting to be attacked, they would gain much. Then striking both parties of the enemy at the same time would enhance their own chance of success. So he heartily indorsed

Chasca's arrangement.

"Which column would it please you to lead?"

the native commander asked deferentially.

"I will take the first," the professor responded promptly; an answer the chief seemed to expect, and appeared greatly pleased with. He gave a few orders to the captain in charge of the first company; then he addressed the professor again, saying:—

"The first five companies, of fifty men each, will follow you. I will lead the remainder," and

he started back down the line.

Turning to his native subordinate, the aeronaut said, "Forward!" and the march was resumed. Five minutes brought them to the

beginning of the hedge-rows. Still there were no signs of the enemy. Three minutes more passed. The junction of the cross-roads was reached and passed. Just ahead Mr. Barton saw the opening through the bushes which led into the field where he believed his opponent was in waiting, and was about to order a charge at that point, when loud shouts and the clash of arms were heard in the rear. Chasca had begun his attack.

The next instant a body of armed men, headed by the well-known form of the curaca of Arauco, rushed through the gap into the roadway.

"Forward!" cried the aeronaut. With shouts his soldiers dashed ahead, hurling their spears, and drawing their short swords. The battle was on.

The moment Topar glanced down the line of his opponents he knew two facts: they had in some way learned of his ambush; they had come prepared to overthrow him. For an instant the awe he had felt so many times for the strangers came upon him. As he hesitated, a score of his followers fell beneath the well-aimed javelins of the professor's troops. It confused his men who were still pressing through the gap in the hedge. They were on the verge of a panic.

The sight maddened him. Sternly he com-

manded his soldiers to advance. Then he himself leaped toward Professor Barton, now not a rod away. Raising his sword to strike, he cried out,—

"Now prove your power, false child of the sun!"

Calmly the aeronaut awaited his onslaught. Not a muscle moved until the furious chief was almost upon him. Then there was a quick movement of his sword arm. The sword of his assailant went flying from his grasp. The same thrust went on and into the breast of the native. With one sharp cry he dropped to the pavement—dead.

Both troops had suspended hostilities during the brief duel. But now, as their leader fell, the Araucan soldiers broke in wild confusion and fled. With exulting cries their opponents rushed after them, slaying, as their custom was, the fleeing enemy on every hand. In a moment the four Americans were standing alone beside the dead chief.

The professor drew a long breath. Then turning to his comrades, he said:—

"I am sorry I had to kill the poor fellow; but he brought it upon himself. Let us go back and see how Chasca fares. We cannot hope that he has met with as good fortune as ourselves." But when the little party had retraced their steps to the entrance of the second field, they saw at a glance that the fighting was about over there. In the angle of the hedge, where two rows of bushes, one along the main road and one down the by-path, came together, most of the troops were collected, while here and there could be seen little groups of two or three pursuing the fleeing enemy.

Chasca noticed them as they approached, and

came toward them.

"We took them by surprise," he said. "They had expected us to go by, and were collected in that corner. Our men rushed in upon them and had them surrounded before they could recover from their astonishment at our coming. They fought well until Nasca fell, seriously wounded; then they lost heart, and the fight was soon over. But how about yourselves?"

The professor briefly outlined his own contest with Topar and its outcome. The curaca listened eagerly, and at the conclusion ex-

claimed: —

"It is as I thought! I was sure that victory would be ours. It is well that it is so complete. There will now be no danger of further uprising. This will show the futility of any attempt to foment civil strife. I will give or-

ders that Nasca be cared for; and also for the recall of the troops."

He hurried away, and soon the notes of the horn sounded forth the recall. Immediately the soldiers began to return, and within fifteen minutes the column was again formed in order. Then it was found that the total loss from Chasca's troops, including the wounded, was only twenty-five; while nearly three hundred of the opposing force had been slain, and not far from three-fourths of the remainder were prisoners.

The curaca of the white city received this report from his lieutenant with apparent gratification, and immediately issued a number of orders which sent messengers hurrying away in different directions. Then he turned to the

aeronaut, saying: -

"The battle has been such a complete victory I can safely accompany you on to Zoctlan. I have given orders for my own troops to return to the city, but to hold themselves in readiness for marching at a moment's notice. I have also sent out men to report any movements that may take place in the rebellious districts. However, with Nasca a prisoner and wounded, and Topar dead, I fear little. If you are ready, we may as well continue our journey."

"We are ready," was the answer.

Five minutes later the party were in their litters and on their way to Zoctlan as though no contest had occurred. When within a half mile of their destination there suddenly came to their ears the sound which they had heard on the lake the previous morning—the deep, booming notes of the temple gong. Instantly the bearers halted, and all counted the strokes with bated breath.

"Nine!" ejaculated the professor, as the last note died away. "I suppose that is for Topar's death, is it not?" he inquired of Chasca, whose litter was next his own. The chieftain nodded. "I sent a messenger at once," he said. "It is our custom that a curaca's death shall be announced immediately, whatever the cause." Then the journey was resumed.

The afternoon was well advanced when Tupac's palace was reached, and the new-comers found its inmates in a state of great alarm. They had been anxious over the long delay in the coming of their friends, and when they heard the nine notes from the temple gong their fears became acute, for of course they had no idea of its meaning. It took some time to explain the events which had transpired, and Tupac gave a sigh of relief when he heard the outcome of the skirmish.

The remainder of the day was spent by the professor in conferring with old Malca about the situation of the buried treasure of the Antalcan race. The state Quipus was brought forth, and with its aid the aged historian was able to give a minute description of the locality where the fleeing Peruvians had concealed their gems and gold. This description the aeronaut carefully wrote down in full, that there might be no uncertainty when Admaxla should make his search for them.

Chasca reported to Tupac and his father the proclamation which Professor Barton had made in the temple, that Admaxla was to be the Inca of the land upon his return, and from that hour the three men believed that this was the real purpose of the strangers in making their visit to the plateau. So impressed was the old bard by this thought, that he prophesied the safe journey of the visitors to their distant home, the return of Admaxla with the wisdom of the gods, and a bright and glorious future for the land. The younger men, however, took the announcement more soberly; they realized that its fulfilment would make a radical change in the affairs of the nation. But it was not their business to question the wishes or the commands of the children of the sun.

Admaxla himself was so filled with the visions of his coming experiences, and also with the sorrow of parting with Tara and his mother and sister for so long a period, that he gave little heed to the new promise. There had been so much else that was wonderful in the visit of the strangers, he took this as the natural climax of all the rest. The few preparations for the long journey that had not already been made were completed before the evening meal, and at an early hour the whole household retired to rest.

But at midnight the court at the centre of the palace was a scene of great activity. The four castaways were there, clad once more in their own garb, which had not been worn since their first day in the white city. Admaxla was there, wearing the blue garments which Mr. Barton had selected for him. Chasca and Tupac were also there, and the other members of their families.

All of the heavier apparatus connected with the professor's balloon had been sent from the white city the previous day, under the charge of Admaxla and his father, and had been forwarded by them to the little opening where the ancient pathway down the mountain side left the plateau, the point chosen by the aeronaut for the coming ascent. Consequently the only burdens borne by any of the party were the weapons selected from the treasure house and one or two light articles which had been found needful at the last moment.

Taking up the light parcels the little party bade the ladies of the two households farewell, a proceeding which taxed Admaxla's fortitude to the utmost; then, accompanied by Chasca

and Tupac, they set forth.

As they walked silently on through the darkness, the various members of the company were busy with their thoughts. The aeronauts were thinking of the many strange experiences through which they had passed since their eventful balloon ascension in New Orleans nearly three months before; of the reception they had received at the hands of the natives on the mountain plateau, and of the unwavering friendship the three leading chiefs had shown them. They were wondering, too, what adventures were awaiting them in the long weeks which must necessarily elapse before they traversed the wilderness at the foot of the mountain and reached the abodes of civilized men. Would they ever reach their native land, and see again their loved ones, who doubtless mourned them as dead? Or would they, after enduring endless privations, die one by one in

the great unknown tract through which they must force their passage? Who could tell?

To Professor Barton the situation seemed especially grave. He knew, as the others did not, the dangers of an ascent in a fire balloon. He had done the best he could with the materials which were at his command, but still he felt a certain misgiving as to the outcome of the experiment. These doubts and forebodings he kept strictly to himself, however, and his comrades as yet knew nothing of the

dangers of their coming balloon voyage.

Very different were the thoughts in the mind of Admaxla. He was dreaming of the wonders which he should see in the land of the strangers. Would they prove as great as Rod and Todd had described them? Were there really great machines which could drag long rows of houses after them with the speed of the wind? Were there in reality huge vessels, as large as his father's palace, which propelled themselves over the waves? Ah, he should see, and he should not be separated from Rod, for whom he already had an affection that amounted almost to a passion; that was a greater pleasure than all the rest.

Chasca and Tupac were thinking of the time when the boy should return to them, filled with the wisdom of the strangers, and equipped with their marvellous powers. Would the lad feel the same toward them and his people then as he did now? Was the experiment, after all, worth what it would cost? Only their implicit faith in the visitors kept them from withdrawing, even at this late hour, from the compact into which they had entered.

Thus busy with their thoughts, the four miles they were to go were soon passed over, and they reached the spot where the servants of Tupac were keeping guard over the balloon and its equipment. It still lacked an hour of dawn, and as nothing could be done in the darkness, the little group sat down upon some near-by boulders, and in silence awaited the coming

day.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PERILOUS DESCENT.

For some time the group sat there in the darkness, each one busy with his thoughts. Then at length the eastern horizon began to be tinged with red and pink; the rocky peaks at the opposite side of the plateau showed dimly against the increasing glow; the dome of the great temple in the white city caught the rays on its golden oval; and day was at hand.

As soon as there was sufficient light, the professor began his operations, assisted by his companions. Going over to the pile of apparatus, he rapidly unfastened the largest package, unrolling upon the ground the air sack of the balloon. It was an immense globe of cotton cloth, coated with a sort of glazed paint, and had been made under the aeronaut's supervision by a large number of native women. At its bottom a large hoop had been inserted, leaving a circular aperture to admit the heated air. From this hoop depended the stout ropes to which the car was to be attached.

The car itself had caused Mr. Barton the most trouble, but he had at length succeeded in getting the Antalcan basket-makers to construct an immense bowl-shaped wickerwork, some ten feet in diameter, and with sides rising three feet from the floor. It was stoutly built, and capable of sustaining a very considerable weight.

Around its sides, at a height of eighteen inches, a narrow shelf or seat ran for the accommodation of the passengers, and at regular intervals were the loops, to which the ropes from the air sack were to be attached; while at its centre, so that it came directly under the opening in the balloon, was a small clay furnace, to hold the fire which was to supply the heated air for the airship.

All these items the professor had explained to his comrades while the articles were being made, so that they were already familiar with their uses. When the big sack had been unrolled, it was placed on an elevated platform, which had been erected by the aeronaut's order, with the hoop projecting a short distance over the edge. The car was now quickly attached, and then the work of loading the basket was commenced.

Professor Barton would allow no one to do this but himself, as it was of the utmost importance that the packages be so arranged as to keep the car in perfect equilibrium. One by one the carefully made parcels were handed to him and stowed away in the space under the circular seat. There were the five blankets for the party; beans, dried llama's flesh, quinoa, and smoked fish, in quantity sufficient for several weeks' consumption; a few cooking utensils; a coil of rope; and a stout rope ladder of some length, which the professor said might be needed before they reached the plains below.

In addition to these articles there were the bundles of straw to be used as fuel in the clay furnace. It took but a short time, however, for the skilled hands of Mr. Barton to arrange each parcel in its proper place, and the sun was hardly a half hour high when he announced:—

"Everything is now in readiness. We will therefore begin inflating the balloon. I will start the fire."

This was soon done, and then at the aeronaut's direction a number of the attendants of Tupac mounted the platform and held the folds of cloth apart as much as possible, so as to allow the heated air a free passage into the great sack.

While the fire was getting under way, the professor turned to his companions, saying:—

"You will notice that the wind is now blow-

ing from the east, and will, therefore, carry us away from the plateau. I chose this time and this place for two reasons. The wind here is always an easterly one in the early morning, and it is only about four thousand feet down to the lower spur of the mountain at this point; whereas on the other three sides the descent is from six to seven thousand feet."

Here he paused and gave his attention to feeding the fire. Already the canvas was commencing to swell, a process his three comrades were watching with great interest, while on the faces of the two curacas and their attendants awe and wonder were mingled.

"How long will it take to inflate the sack?"

inquired Rod, eagerly.

"Not over twenty-five minutes," returned Professor Barton, "and it may not take over seventeen. It depends greatly on the amount of heat given off by our furnace."

Ten minutes passed. The great globe was now nearly distended and no longer needed the support of the servants, who descended to the ground. The amazement on the faces of all the natives had increased as the work progressed, until there was somewhat of fear mingled with it.

"Come," said the aeronaut, "it is time for us

to take our places in the car. In a very few moments the balloon will rise." Then turning to Admaxla's father he continued: "Yesterday I promised the people at the temple that Admaxla should return in five years. He will come with powers which will enable him to scale the mountain side. On the evening before the day he is expected, therefore, have a trusty messenger waiting here, who can bring you word of his arrival before it is announced to the people."

The two chiefs readily promised that the courier should be there, and then, after all had shaken hands with the curacas, the five voyagers stepped into the car. Already the airship was swaying in the morning breeze, and barely had the little company taken their assigned positions when it slowly began to rise.

Inch by inch it rose, with an even motion, and so quietly that the car was several inches from the ground before the onlookers noticed it; when they did, however, with awe-stricken faces they fell to the ground, and once more that cry went up,—

"The gods have come down to us!"

Here a stronger current of air caught the balloon and carried it, still rising slowly, off beyond the edge of the plateau, and over the spur of the mountain nearly a mile below. As he saw the ground receding, Admaxla's face grew pale, and he clutched the side of the car tightly.

Noticing this, Professor Barton said kindly

and reassuringly: -

"Do not be alarmed, my lad. There is no danger so long as you sit perfectly still." Then turning to the other occupants of the basket, he went on, "On account of the rude nature of our airship, we will be obliged to remain as nearly motionless as possible."

The native lad seemed entirely satisfied by his friend's assurance, and gazed calmly back at

his native land, now some distance away.

"How long will this balloon keep afloat, professor?" questioned Todd.

"We will probably reach the ground again within a half hour. See, we have already commenced to fall!"

It was a fact which all could detect by glancing back at the cliff they had just left. Its summit was some distance above them, and as they looked, rose higher and higher, a conclusive proof that they were slowly dropping.

No longer feeling the stiff breeze, since the mountain shut it off, the airship now hung

almost motionless, except for its gradual descent. Twenty minutes passed in this way, and then the aeronauts found themselves within two thousand feet of the ground. Another ten minutes passed, and less than a thousand feet separated them from the land below.

"We shall be down in ten minutes more, if all goes well," declared Professor Barton; "and see! we shall land almost exactly opposite the break in the pathway down the mountain side. That is well, for it will enable us to follow the old trail, just as if we had crossed the chasm by a bridge."

Slowly the moments passed; the balloon was within fifty feet of the ground when suddenly Rod touched the aeronaut's arm. "Look there!" he cried in alarm. "The canvas is on fire!"

As he spoke a flame burst out from one side of the sack; then with a rush the heated air escaped; the canvas collapsed; and balloon and car dropped like a stone to the rocky ground below.

Fortunately for the voyagers the great basket did not turn over in its descent, nor did the burning air sack in its collapse fall upon them, so they were not entangled in its folds. Possibly, too, the broad wicker bottom of the car

offered a resistance to the atmosphere which lessened the rapidity of their descent, and so lightened the force of their fall; for while they struck the ground with a thud which threw them into a heap, yet no one was seriously injured; and hastily picking themselves up, they jumped from the wreck.

"Any one hurt?" asked the professor, anxiously. Then as he saw all were able to move about, he went on: "No? Thank God for that! Now we must remove our supplies from the car before they take fire," and he suited his action to his words.

There was need of haste, for the flames were spreading rapidly along the canvas, and the time in which to work would be short. All fell to with a will, however, in spite of their shaken and bruised bodies, and the last parcel was removed just as the wickerwork of the car took fire.

As they stood there watching the rapid destruction of the airship, Professor Barton turned to his companions, saying:—

"This is what I feared from the beginning; but I said nothing, trusting we might escape such an accident. Had we been at any altitude when the sack caught, we should have met with almost instant death. We were fortunate,

indeed, to be so near the ground. I have made my last ascent in a fire balloon."

"It served our purpose, at any rate," remarked Todd, "and, as you suggested, professor, we are down at almost the exact spot where we would have crossed the chasm, could we have bridged it. Look!"

His comrades glanced in the direction indicated by his outstretched hand, and noticed for the first time that they were within a dozen rods of the abyss which had been caused by the earthquake, and directly opposite the place where the path down from the plateau ended so abruptly.

"Had we been a few rods to the east when the canvas caught fire, our fall would have been a terrible one," exclaimed Mr. Todd, with a shudder. "I think I have had enough of ballooning to last me for a lifetime."

"I trust we shall not find it necessary to make use of one again," returned the aeronaut. "But come, let us arrange our bundles, and continue our descent. We can now follow this old pathway, since it is at hand. It may save us some hard climbing."

The packages were soon distributed among the party, and the tramp over the mountain range begun. The path led for some distance along the edge of the abyss caused by the ancient convulsion of the earth, and was fairly smooth; but it then turned away from the chasm, and became rough and broken. The steepness also increased, and the wanderers were soon sliding and slipping and scrambling down the mountain side in a way which to say the least was very trying to their nerves.

"I should think," Mr. Todd at length observed, panting heavily, "I should think we must have missed the pathway altogether."

"Perhaps not," Professor Barton responded.

"The earthquake which parted the cliffs so soon after the passage of the Antalcans may have changed the formation of this ridge to some extent. Possibly we shall before long find better going."

His surmise proved to be a correct one. A few minutes later the ground suddenly became smoother, and the track emerged upon the edge of a narrow gorge. On beholding this,

the eyes of the aeronaut brightened.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "the worst portion of our march is over, unless I am much mistaken. This is, without doubt, the little valley up which the old Peruvians fled, and in which they were besieged. The pathway will probably descend into it before long."

But it was some time before his words proved true; for the slope was so gradual for the remainder of the passage that the little party were almost of the opinion they should not reach the bottom of the gorge at all, when a sudden turn of the path brought them into it.

Mr. Todd sat down heavily upon a boulder beside a small stream that gushed out from the rocks, mopping his warm brow vigorously.

"I must say," he gasped, glancing up at the mountain which towered above them, "that I am thankful we have got down here. I was not made for a mountain climber, that is certain."

The rest of the company, though not quite so exhausted from their descent, were nevertheless glad to avail themselves of the opportunity to rest. While doing so, Todd asked:—

"Which way do we go now, professor? How can you tell which direction is the right one?"

"The fleeing Peruvians came up the valley, so our way is to go down it," was the aeronaut's reply. "I should say we have but to follow this tiny stream down the slope," pointing to the west, "and we shall come out into a more open country. Anyway, a trial will soon show whether I am right or not."

In this opinion the other members of the

party concurred, and the march was soon resumed in the direction indicated by the aeronaut. The surface of the gorge, while to some extent broken, was, nevertheless, smooth enough for easy walking, and quite a relief after the moun-

tain pathway.

The valley increased in both width and fertility as they descended it, until they approached its mouth, perhaps a mile beyond the point where they entered it; then its walls suddenly contracted again to within twenty-five or thirty feet of each other. This space was nearly filled with the ruins of what had once evidently been the defences of the Peruvians in their fight with the hostile Indians four hundred years before.

Professor Barton was much interested in these fortifications, and would have gladly stopped there, in order to examine them more closely, but for the fact that the afternoon was already well along, and he was anxious to reach a more suitable place for an encampment.

With the aid of the big rope ladder which they had brought along with them, but which they had not previously needed, the travellers climbed the old wall, and when once down upon the other side, the aeronaut said, meantime looking earnestly about him:—

"It must be somewhere near here that your ancestors buried their treasure, Admaxla. I wish we might locate the place now, so that when you are on your way back to your people, you will know just where to dig for it," and he took from his pocket the note-book in which he had written a description of the spot at Malca's dictation. Referring to this, he said:—

"They made their stand for the disastrous battle upon a knoll, hemmed in on two sides by a cliff which terminated in three peaks. After the contest they buried their fallen Inca and treasure at a point where converging lines drawn from the three peaks would intersect. Do any of you see a small hill within a short distance which answers to the description?"

"There is one over there!" the native lad exclaimed, pointing to a slight rise backed by a three-pointed rock a half mile to their left.

"Yes, I see it now," was the professor's an-

swer. "We will go over there."

A ten-minute's walk was sufficient to bring them to the knoll, which rose to a height of perhaps fifty feet above the surrounding plain. Its southern and western sides were against a cliff that ascended abruptly and solidly until near its top, where it split into three narrow and pointed peaks. This left only two sides of the little elevation open to an attack, and it was just such a spot as any party, suddenly surprised by an enemy, would have chosen for a defence.

Having arrived there, the professor stood for some time in silence, measuring the three prongs of the cliff with his eye, and calculating about where lines drawn convergingly from each would intersect; but at length he was about to speak, when Rod came running toward him.

"See here, Mr. Barton," he said, "what is this?" and he held out a small object which he had found. A closer examination showed it to be a part of a metal spear much like those in

use on the mountain plateau.

"I guess we have struck the right place fast enough," the lad remarked, as they finished their scrutiny. "I found it lying partly buried down yonder where the rains have gullied out the hill for a rod or more."

"It certainly would seem so," the aeronaut replied; "and Admaxla on his return journey will have no trouble in identifying the locality. But we must go into camp at once, for it will soon be too dark to do so. This is as good a place to pass the night as I have seen, only we must provide some sort of a shelter."

The little squad were soon busily at work preparing for the coming darkness. A rude

hut was constructed along the side of the cliff by leaning some poles against it and covering them with brush. The material for this was found in a thicket a short distance off; and from the same source a supply of fuel for a fire was gathered. As Rod kindled the latter with one of the few matches they possessed, he suddenly called out:—

"What are we going to do for water, professor? We didn't think to bring any from the brook in the gorge. I wonder if there is any nearer?"

A diligent search was made for some distance around, but no stream or spring could be found; and at length it was given up, the aeronaut saying:—

"This explains why the Peruvian fugitives could not remain here more than a few hours. There was no water for themselves or their animals, and so during the night they fled to the gorge a half mile away. It is a movement we shall have to repeat at dawn, or suffer from thirst."

His companions agreed with him before they had finished their dry and unsatisfactory lunch. Nothing but the heavy darkness which had already settled down over the hills and plains prevented them from attempting to reach the

brook that night. As it was they decided, though at considerable discomfiture, to remain where they were; and soon all had laid themselves down in the rude shelter to sleep except Professor Barton, who, at his own request, was to take the first watch of two hours.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNPLEASANT SITUATION.

The night passed without other incident than the regular change in watchmen, and at an early hour in the morning the encampment was astir. There was but one thought in the minds of all, emphasized by their parched throats—a return should be made at once to the mouth of the gorge for breakfast. It took but a few minutes to get ready for the proposed removal, and the five travellers were soon on their way back to the ruined wall, Rod carrying a burning brand from their recent camp fire.

On their arrival at the bank of the little stream, just outside of the old fortification, a second fire was speedily started, and a meal was soon under way which promised to be more palatable than that of the evening before. While the food was cooking, the various members of the little band performed their morning ablutions, and then, much refreshed by the bathing, gathered about the smouldering coals

to partake of their breakfast with a sharpened

appetite.

For a time all were silent, busily engaged with the food before them; but after the first edge of their hunger had been dulled, the little group grew talkative. Todd was the first to speak, and his words were a question:—

"Which way shall we go now, professor?" he asked. "North or east? How can you tell the nearest way to reach civilization again?"

The aeronaut smiled. "There is but one safe way for us to go," was his reply. "You should be able to think it out for yourself. Try it and see."

The lad was silent for a few moments, and then as he did not speak, Rod said,—

"I know which way you mean, Professor Barton."

Todd glanced at his cousin in surprise. "I'd like to know how you can tell that!" he exclaimed.

"Tell him, Rod," the balloonist remarked with a pleasant laugh.

"We must follow this brook until we come to a larger stream, and that will lead us to the coast," the boy explained.

"But this stream is flowing in a direction directly opposite to that in which the Atlantic lies," objected Mr. Todd. "I should think it would be much nearer and quicker if we went to the east."

"But you overlook several important facts," commented the aeronaut. "One is that we have no compass by which to guide our steps through the trackless forests that lie to the east of us. Another is that the way for a while, as you can see, will lead through a mountainous district, and is, therefore, likely to prove difficult, and dangerous as well. A third item, and one, after last night's experience, we should not ignore, is that if we leave the brook we are not sure we shall always find water when we want it. There are sections, doubtless, between here and the coast, where we might journey days without finding a drop to quench our thirst.

"So much as to the objections; now as to the points in our favor if we follow down this stream: we are not only always sure of the precious fluid, a more important necessity than food itself, but we have a valley in which to walk. Then, however much the brook may wind, it will eventually lead us to a larger one, some tributary of the Orinoco, down which we can sail to the habitations of white men. As I recall the geography of this region, we cannot travel many miles to the west without striking one of the southern branches of the Orinoco, and though it may be a longer way to the coast, it is to my mind a surer and safer and easier one. We must run no unnecessary risks if we hope to extricate ourselves from this wilderness."

"Very true," the manufacturer assented. "I might have known you had good reasons for your chosen route, you always have had for every proposal you have made. I admit the

folly of my own theory."

"I have not been a balloonist for nothing," Mr. Barton responded, with a hearty laugh. "My experiences in various parts of the world have been, if no more, a most excellent training for the unfortunate predicament in which we now find ourselves."

"It is fortunate for the rest of us that we have you to advise us," Todd put in; "if we had not, we should have little chance of ever

seeing the United States again."

"If it had not been for me, you would not be here now," the professor replied; "so it is only right that I should be able to help you out of the unfortunate plight into which I unintentionally put you."

"But you have some plan of action all thought

out for us, I know," Rod interrupted. "You spoke of our sailing down the river when we reach it. Tell us how you are going to

arrange that."

"Yes, I have a plan," the aeronaut confessed.

"Last night while keeping watch I went over our whole journey in my mind, and have decided on a programme which I think it will be well for us, as far as possible, to adhere to. I will tell you of it that you may give me your own opinions of it.

"We will, as Rod has already said, follow down this brook until it joins a river or some other stream large enough to float a raft or boat. There we will make camp, and remain long enough to construct a canoe, or light craft of some kind, which will accommodate us all. During the sojourn we will also endeavor to increase our supply of food by hunting and fishing, so that we need not stop for that purpose when once our voyage is begun.

"As soon as the boat is finished, we will embark, and paddle down the river until we reach the sea or come to some town. If, as I believe, this rivulet empties into one of the southern branches of the Orinoco, we shall fall in with some village or town before we have gone many hundred miles. Once we are

among our fellow-men again, there will be no trouble in securing a passage to our own land.

"This is my plan, as I thought it out last night. Perhaps some of you may be able to suggest an improvement. If so, I shall be more than glad to accept of it," and the speaker paused.

"No indeed," came the quick response from all of his companions; while Mr. Todd added:—

"I do not myself see how the programme can be improved, and surely it is the only one for us to attempt to carry out. It not only saves us many a mile of weary tramping, but, though a longer route, will carry us much more quickly to the coast. For however poor the craft we construct, we can sail down a stream much faster than we could walk, even along its banks. I wonder I did not at once see, as my boy did, the true path for us to follow."

"Thank you, sir, and the lads as well, for your hearty acceptance of the plan," Professor Barton said, with evident satisfaction. "There is no reason, then, why we may not begin our

day's march immediately."

To this his comrades agreed, and rising, they began active preparations for the journey. The few cooking utensils were quickly washed and dried; the huge rope ladder, since it would no longer be needed, was concealed in the ruined wall; and the packs readjusted, and lighter by more than fifty pounds, were made ready. There had been some talk of leaving behind the coil of rope also, but to this the aeronaut objected.

"We may need the cord for our boat or raft," he declared, "if not for some other purpose. The want of it in an emergency might be worse than carrying it along." And so it was stowed away in one of the bundles.

As they were about to start, Rod suddenly

queried: -

"What about the fire, professor? We have but a few matches, you know, and if we use one every time we make camp, they will soon be gone. How can we manage it?"

"That is well thought of, Rod," Mr. Barton exclaimed. "It had not occurred to me. I wonder if we could manage to carry some coals of

fire along with us?"

It was Admaxla who now found a way to do this. Motioning his companions to wait a few minutes, he dropped his pack and hurried off toward an old dead tree standing a few rods up the valley. When he returned he brought in his hands several chunks of a dead fungus, hard, dry, and yet quite porous. Taking the small kettle in which they heated their water,

he put into it first a bed of coals from the camp fire, then two of the pieces of the punk he had found, and covered the whole with ashes.

"There," he said, "that will keep alive until noon, when I will replenish it with the other

chunks."

"Good for you, Admaxla!" shouted Todd, enthusiastically, and taking the native lad's hand for a vigorous shake. "Between you and the professor we shall get along first-rate."

The young Antalcan laughed, and returned the hand-shake. Then he volunteered to carry the metal boiler, and to keep the precious fire from going out. With this understanding the little company set forth down the right bank of the brook.

For some little time their way led through an open vale, sloping quite sharply to the northwest. But after going three or four miles woods appeared, and they were soon in a dense forest. This made the travelling much more difficult, especially as they often had to make wide detours away from the stream in order to get around the thick underbrush which lined its banks. In other places it became necessary to cut a path through the rank growth that impeded their way with the swords which Mr. Todd and Professor Barton carried.

This was hard and tiresome work, and although each member of the party took his turn in wielding the awkward implements, the progress they made was of necessity slow. More than once Mr. Todd was led to exclaim:—

"I thought that mountain path was bad enough, and was thankful to be down on level ground again, but I am not sure that this is not harder and slower work than coming down the rocky cliff."

However, all the route was not made up of thickets and underbrush. There were some open places where the wanderers could proceed more rapidly, and they had covered perhaps twelve or fifteen miles when the aeronaut, glancing at his watch, said:—

"It is nearly four o'clock, and we may as well be on the lookout for a suitable place to spend the night. It will not do to sleep without a

covering such as we had last night."

"I hope we shall reach such a place soon, for

I am nearly used up," Todd admitted.

His wish was destined to be gratified quickly, for the travellers had not gone a half mile farther when they came into an opening larger than any they had seen since entering the woods. It was several acres in extent, and entirely free from trees and underbrush. The ground, more-

over, rose sharply from the edge of the stream, forming quite a good-sized knoll at the centre

of the clearing.

"Ah! this is what we are looking for," said the aeronaut with a sigh of relief, as he dropped his burden to the ground. "We will make our camp at the top of that little hill. Now let us all do our best, for the sooner we get our shelter

ready, the sooner we can rest."

The others needed no spurring to make their efforts greater, and all were speedily engaged in arranging a suitable habitation for the night. Rod and Todd cut and brought the limbs and small trees necessary for the hut, while the other members of the party constructed the primitive lodging. This was done by sticking four small posts upright into the soft earth. They were joined by four crosspieces at the top, on which were laid a number of stout poles. Over this rude framework boughs were placed, until a fairly tight roof had been formed.

Other limbs were set in a slanting position along the sides of the structure, their tops resting against the roof, and their bases upon the ground. Then boughs were interwoven among them, and so the walls of the shelter were made. The end toward the brook was left entirely open, and just before it the camp fire was started,

kindled by the coals which Admaxla, true to his promise, had kept alive.

When the rude hut had been completed, Rod and the professor set about getting the evening meal, while Todd and the native lad collected fuel to keep the fire supplied during the night. There were a number of dead trees at one end of the little clearing, and to these the boys went for their supply. Several trips had been made by them, and nearly enough of the dry wood had been secured, when an accident occurred which came near terminating in a dire calamity for the little band.

Todd had gone for his last load, and noticing that one of the stumps, from which he had broken all the branches, was decayed at its base, he conceived the idea of pulling it over, and dragging it to the camp. It was so large, he knew if he could only secure it, it would burn for hours, and thus save them from a constant attendance upon the fire. Accordingly he braced his feet against its roots, and taking a firm grip near the top, pulled.

But he found that although the centre of the stump was entirely gone, there was a firm rim of wood about the outside, and it resisted his first efforts. He would not give up the attempt, however, and merely paused to get his breath. Then, taking a fresh hold, he exerted his utmost strength. For a moment it was apparently without effect; then with a sudden snap the wood, weakened doubtless by his previous attempts, gave way. So unexpectedly did the break come, the lad was unprepared for it, and losing his footing, fell backward, the log coming down upon his feet, pinning him to the ground.

Nor was that the worst; for a large rattlesnake, which had been hidden within the cavity of the stump, was dislodged by the sudden breakage, and fell upon Todd's breast. Instantly coiling itself, the reptile, with an angry hiss and a vigorous shaking of its rattles, drew back its head ready to strike the helpless lad.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HOME IN THE WILDS.

As Todd lay there helpless, staring with fascinated eyes at the hideous reptile which had coiled itself upon his breast, he was not ignorant of the grave danger he was in. He knew that it was useless for him, hampered as he was, to attempt to brush the serpent one side before it could strike. He was also aware that should he cry out for help, the other members of the party could not reach him in time to save him. He realized, moreover, that death would not immediately follow the snake's bite, but that he should linger in intense agony for hours before the final sleep came.

All these thoughts flashed through the lad's mind in an instant, and yet he, with admirable self-control, did not stir. Possibly if he remained motionless the reptile would cease to look upon him as an enemy, and, having made the threat, would then uncoil itself and glide away without striking. Todd was quite sure

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that he had somewhere read that the rattle-snake, in a critical moment, could be prevented from giving its fatal blow by keeping perfectly quiet. Anyway, he would try the ruse, as there was nothing else he could safely do. So with his own eyes staring into the snake's glittering optics, and without the

quiver of a muscle, he waited.

There is no question but that his motionless attitude disconcerted the angry serpent. Two or three times it drew back its head as though about to give the deadly bite, and then withheld it; and that delay on the part of the snake, brief as it was, was an important factor in the salvation of the boy, though he knew it not. To him it seemed as though the reptile only delayed its stroke that it might the longer torment him; and angered by the fact he, as the serpent with a louder hiss than it had yet given prepared to strike its blow, looked squarely at it, determined to face it with a bold front to the very end.

But just at that instant there came a swift, whirring sound, and almost before the bewildered lad had time to think, the snake was knocked from its position on his breast and went flying through the air for a distance of several feet. A moment later Admaxla ran

swiftly by him, and reaching the serpent just after it struck the ground, quickly despatched it. Then returning to the prostrate lad, he lifted the tree trunk from off his feet, and assisted him to rise, anxiously inquiring:—

"Are you hurt, Todd? Did the snake

strike you?"

"No; thanks to you, I'm safe," was the response, as Todd shook himself to make sure he was all right. "How did you do it, old chap?"

"See here," the native answered, leading the way to where the dead rattlesnake lay. Bending over the horrid form, Todd saw that an arrow had transfixed the head, and was now

protruding several inches on both sides.

"I shot him with my bow," Admaxla explained, "and the arrow fortunately struck right in the neck. The force of the blow was sufficient to carry the snake clear off your body, and its suddenness prevented the reptile from striking."

"But how did you happen to see my danger?" Todd queried. "I thought I left you at

the camp."

"So you did," was the reply; "but I only stopped to pick up my bow and arrows, and then I followed you. I had noticed several

birds in the trees just beyond here, and thought I might kill one for supper. I was only a short distance away when you fell, and saw the snake coil itself on your breast. But I knew I would not have time to reach you before it struck, and so did the only thing in my power to save you. I am glad I succeeded."

"You're a brick, Admaxla!" exclaimed his comrade, impulsively; "and I can't begin to tell you how much I thank you for saving my life. But it was a close shave, wasn't it?" and he shook the native boy's hand vigorously.

By this time the other inmates of the camp had reached the spot, and were excitedly in-

quiring what had happened.

The whole story was gone over again, and the dead snake exhibited in its confirmation. The ugly reptile was evidently one of the largest of its kind, for when straightened out it measured more than six feet in length, and possessed nineteen rattles.

Mr. Todd, Rod, and Professor Barton were loud in their praises of Admaxla's coolness and skill, for it was these that had rescued Todd from his unhappy dilemma; but the native lad, though greatly pleased, received their encomiums with becoming modesty. For some time longer the party discussed the affair; then they re-

turned to the camp fire, Todd and Admaxla carrying between them the dead tree trunk, first making sure, however, that no other venomous reptile was lurking within it.

The supper which the professor and Rod had prepared was heartily enjoyed by all, and soon the little band, with the exception of Todd, who stood the first watch, were wrapped in slumber.

The night passed without further incident, and at an early hour in the morning breakfast was eaten and the journey resumed. The ground over which the way led was very similar to that covered on the preceding day. But when a distance of five or six miles had been travelled, the stream, whose bank they were following, suddenly emerged into another of considerable size. Stopping only long enough to blaze two huge trees which stood near the juncture of the brooks, so that they could identify the place should they care to return that way, the wanderers hastened on down the larger stream.

For several days the castaways journeyed on, meeting with no serious difficulty by the way, although the travelling was such that no rapid progress could be made. The country was still hilly, and in some places the stream they were following became boiling, seething rapids, in

which no boat could have lived. Again the valley would narrow until there was but a scant passage between the banks of the river and the rocky mountain side, which rose abruptly to a considerable height. Indeed, had it not been the dry season, there would have been, in such localities, no footing for them at all; for unmistakable marks on the rugged cliffs showed that during the rainy period the waters rushed through these narrow channels, filling them from side to side to a great depth.

After five days of such experiences, however, the travellers found themselves on the verge of an immense plain, where the river grew wider, and ran with a slower and more even current. But the forest still remained dense on both sides of the stream, and the undergrowth, as though it sprang from a richer soil, became ranker and more luxuriant.

"It is going to be a hard job to make our way through that stuff," the manufacturer remarked, as he caught sight of the great plain and its seemingly impenetrable thickets.

"We shall not attempt it," the aeronaut replied quietly. "It is now time to prepare ourselves for a voyage down the river; and there is just the place we want for our permanent camp." As he spoke he pointed to an open space of considerable size a little to their left. The ground sloped gently from the river's bank for a distance of three or four hundred yards, and was covered with soft grass; while at its centre a little spring bubbled up, and forming a tiny rill, ran to join the larger stream below.

"Ah! no better place could be selected," the professor continued, with evident satisfaction, as the little cavalcade filed down into the clearing. "Here are water, air, sunshine, drainage—everything to make this a healthy dwelling-place; there at the brink of the stream is an ideal location for our shipyard, while about us are the very trees we shall need. Here then we will stop. For to-night we will make our usual brush hut; but to-morrow we will fix things for a long stay—until we have constructed some sort of a craft to carry us, as it surely will, down this river to the habitations of man."

"I shall be glad to stop in a place where I can breathe easily for a while," said Mr. Todd, as he glanced approvingly around him. "For some reason I feel as though my respiration was cut off under those dense tree-tops."

"We shall all be glad of a change of surroundings, I think," Rod suggested, "and of work as well. It has begun to get tiresome doing nothing but tramp, tramp all day in the heat."

"And a change of diet will be very agreeable, too," added his cousin. "I do hope we shall be able to get some game before long. Dried llama, quinoa, and beans are getting somewhat disagreeable to my taste, I must confess."

The preparations for the night were quickly made, and soon all was quiet in the clearing. At an early hour in the morning, however, the professor aroused his companions, and while eating breakfast a consultation was held. The discussion was opened by the aeronaut himself, who said:—

"We shall, in my judgment, have to remain here for two or three weeks, and may as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible. So our first care should be to erect a more substantial shelter than has been our custom, where our stops were for the night only. This will probably take a couple of days or more. Then we can turn our attention to the construction of a craft of some kind large enough to carry us all down the river; and also to the replenishing of our larder."

"What kind of a boat will you make, professor?" Todd asked. "With the tools we have,

it will not be a very easy task to make one, I'm afraid."

"That is true," was the response; "but we will do our best. I have not fully decided yet as to what plan to adopt. But we have time enough to think it over while building our house."

"I should think a raft of dry logs would be the quickest and easiest to build," was Rod's comment.

"So it would," responded the aeronaut, "but the slowest and most unwieldy after it was built; still, we will see. But let us go to work at once on our shelter."

A site was selected well back from the river, and near the spring, where the ground was fairly level. Four stout posts were cut and driven into the ground firmly, two of them about fifteen feet apart, and on a parallel with the river bank, and the other two ten feet farther back, but directly in line with the first pair. The front poles were cut off about eight feet from the ground, while those in the rear were left at a height of six and a half feet.

Three sides of the rectangle thus formed were enclosed by driving stakes into the ground in a similar manner; but the front, or side facing the river, was only partially fenced in, a space about four feet wide being left for a doorway. These walls were now strengthened by vines woven in across the poles; and then a roof, constructed of saplings covered with a thick layer of sods, was put on over the whole, its front and back edges extending two feet or more beyond the walls of the building.

After a window had been cut in each end of the structure, its walls were plastered with a thick coating of mud, and thus a fairly tight dwelling was secured. Several attempts to make a door for the hut proved unsuccessful, and it was finally decided to hang one of the blankets which they had brought from the

mountain, in the opening at night.

Within the rude shelter five bunks were constructed, and filled with soft moss gathered from the adjacent trees, and then the little party of house-builders regarded their handiwork as complete. It had taken nearly three days of hard toil to accomplish the task, but as the swords of Mr. Barton and Mr. Todd were the only tools they had to use in the work, they felt the building was, after all, erected quite expeditiously.

The campers now turned their attention to boat-building, and found it quite a different thing from their previous undertaking. The professor decided that a canoe would be the best craft for their purpose, but after trying two days to fell a tree large enough for the dugout, and breaking one of the swords in the attempt, all hope of constructing it was abandoned.

Rod's suggestion of a raft now seemed the only available plan, and accordingly it was promptly adopted. From the outset, too, it promised to be more successful, since it could be made of smaller trees. After a little consultation it was decided to construct it of three solid rows of logs, the first and third tiers lying lengthwise, while the second, or middle tier, ran across them. Fortunately a goodly portion of the material needed for their purpose was found along the banks of the stream, uprooted by some previous flood. This not only saved the toilers from the long and hard task of felling the trees, but furnished them with lighter and drier logs, which they had but to cut off at the proper length and drag or float down to the clearing.

It is not to be supposed that the amateur ship-builders made no mistakes; they were obliged to correct their errors a number of times. But patience and experience at length won the day, and the time came when they knew that the raft would be an assured success.

Leaving the professor and Mr. Todd to complete it, the lads, since they were more skilled than the elder members of the party in the use of the primitive weapons at their command, devoted a portion of each day to hunting. Under Admaxla's lead they scoured the surrounding hills and forests, adding not a little to the small stock of provisions they possessed. In fact, they now supplied all the food used in the permanent camp, for they were carefully husbanding that which they had brought from the plateau for their use when the sail down the stream should begin.

It was during one of these hunting excursions, toward the latter part of their stay in the clearing, that an incident occurred which gave to Rod and Todd an opportunity to repay the debt of gratitude which the latter owed the native lad.

The three boys, being less successful that day than usual, had in consequence wandered farther away from their encampment than was their custom. Still they kept the river in sight, knowing that as long as they did so, they were in no danger of becoming lost. Admaxla was in the lead, and some paces ahead of his companions, when he caught sight of some animal just ahead of him. Raising his hand to his

comrades in signal that they should remain where they were, he cautiously advanced.

In a moment he disappeared from sight around an intervening tree trunk, and an instant later his listening associates heard the sharp twang of his bow, as he launched his arrow at his prey. Then there came to their startled ears a strange, snarling cry, followed by the sound of some falling body. Close upon this there arose a piercing human shriek.

With beating hearts Rod and Todd rushed forward, and emerging into a small opening between the huge trees, saw Admaxla lying on the ground, while upon his apparently lifeless form there crouched a large jaguar, which greeted their coming with fierce growls and a

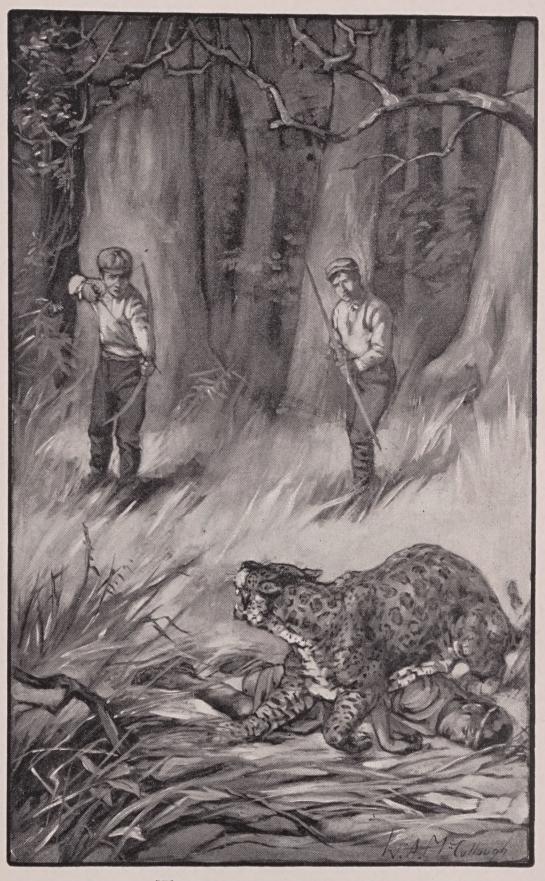
lashing tail.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DOWN THE RIVER.

As the two lads saw the plight of their friend, they came to an abrupt halt. But it was only for a moment. Then, after a glance at each other, with white, set faces they advanced to his rescue.

The jaguar meanwhile had kept his eyes fixed upon his new enemies, seeming for the moment to forget the prey he had already secured. Separating slightly, and fitting arrows to their bows as they went forward, Rod and Todd approached to within twenty feet of the watching beast. Their boldness apparently surprised him for a minute or two, and then he prepared to spring. At that instant, however, Rod sent his arrow full into the face of the animal. So near was he, the light shaft sped true to its mark, striking one of the jaguar's eyes just as he leaped. Blinded by the wound, the huge creature fell short of his intended victim, and rolled upon the ground, pawing



THEIR BOLDNESS SURPRISED HIM.



frantically in his endeavor to draw the offend-

ing weapon from his eye.

Todd was not slow to make use of this opportunity, and taking as careful aim as he could under the circumstances, he let fly his arrow. It struck the beast in the flank, making a deep though not fatal wound; and infuriated by the pain, the savage creature ceased his rollings and sprang for the youth.

But Rod had another arrow already strung, and as the jaguar straightened up, fired again. It was a most fortunate shot; for the stout shaft, striking the animal just behind his foreleg, penetrated to the heart, and with a last

snarl he dropped at Todd's feet — dead.

For a moment the boys could not realize their good fortune. Then with a glad shout they turned their attention to their fallen comrade. To their relief they found he was only stunned and bruised, and making a hasty trip to the river, Rod returned with some water in his cap, which he dashed into the unconscious lad's face.

This had the desired effect, and before many minutes the young Antalcan was able to sit up and look about him. He then explained that, seeing the jaguar through the trees, he had supposed him to be some animal fit for food,—

a pardonable mistake, since no animal of that species had ever been seen on the mountain plateau,—so he advanced without hesitation or fear until within easy range, and fired. His arrow struck the creature in the neck, but inflicted only a flesh wound. Before he could retreat, or had even suspected the serious nature of the encounter, the savage beast leaped upon him, throwing him to the ground with a force that had stunned him. The rest his companions knew.

As soon as Admaxla was sufficiently recovered, the three boys set out on their return to camp, dragging the dead animal behind them. It was quite a load, and delayed them considerably; but they persisted, and some hours later greatly surprised Mr. Todd and the professor, who were already quite alarmed at the prolonged absence of the lads, by drawing the ugly beast up to the hut.

The two men listened with bated breath to the thrilling story the boys had to tell, but at

its close the aeronaut said: -

"This teaches us a lesson we should have learned sooner: that it is not safe for you to wander far from the camp with only the primitive weapons you possess, even if we have less to eat."

To this the manufacturer added an emphatic approval, and then the incident was closed. The lads, however, were more careful during the remainder of their stay at the clearing. The work on the raft now progressed rapidly, and the toilers found that the rope they had brought with them was indispensable, as the professor had prophesied. With this the logs were tightly secured, first in their respective tiers, and then one upon the other. By careful usage also, enough of the cord was left to furnish a long painter at each end of the float.

The latter had been built large enough to permit the construction of a small shelter at the upper end, while at its centre a quantity of earth was placed, closely packed, for the camp fire. The most difficult portion of the entire undertaking was the making of a large sweep for guiding the unwieldy craft in its course. But the combined ingenuity of Rod and the aeronaut finally overcame all difficulties, and one week after Admaxla's escapade the raft was finished.

The next morning their few possessions were transferred from the hut on shore to the hut on the craft, and with a last look about the clearing which had so long been their home in the wilds, the ropes were cast off,

and the long voyage through unknown regions was begun.

The current of the river was not rapid, and owing to the clumsiness of their float, the voyagers made but slow progress. Still, it was much faster than they could have travelled on foot, and without the slightest fatigue on their part, so they were content.

The day passed without event, and when the sun set the distance they had covered could not have been less than twenty-five miles. There had been a unanimous agreement among the voyagers that it would be unsafe to attempt to navigate the river during the night, so a halt was now made. No camp was constructed on the shore, however, the float being simply made fast to the bank at both ends and a watch set.

The next morning the voyage was resumed, and for an hour the monotony of the surrounding forest and placid waters was unbroken. Then Rod, who was in charge of the steering oar, called out to his comrades, who were seated forward and busily talking:—

"Ahoy, there! Have you noticed how much faster we have been going for the last ten minutes? What does it mean?"

The professor looked up and down the stream for a moment, and then said:—

"I see no great increase of speed, Rod. I think you are mistaken," and he went on with his conversation.

Rod was not convinced, however, but said no more until a low, dull, roaring sound on ahead reached his alert ears. Then he called once more to the aeronaut:—

"What is that noise, Mr. Barton? I have heard it for several minutes."

The professor arose and listened intently for an instant. Then he said with some alarm:—

"It is a fall or rapids of some kind. We must turn in to the shore at once."

But his decision came too late. Although every effort was made to head the raft for the bank, it was so unwieldy and the current so strong, they were not halfway there before the rapids were in sight. Then the voyagers saw that they were not nearly so formidable as the sound had led them to believe.

"We will turn the float head down stream again, Rod," announced Professor Barton, who had joined the lad at the helm. "It looks as though we can run the rapids in safety."

And for several minutes it seemed as though the aeronaut was right. The raft, though tossed about severely, still remained right side up, and kept clear of the rocks which dotted the water. But just as the little party were beginning to congratulate themselves on a safe passage through the foaming and rushing current, they reached a point where the stream made a sharp fall of some eight or ten feet.

For an instant the float hung on the brink, then, suddenly whirling half around, it plunged down the watery wall, turning completely over in its descent, and falling, with a loud splash, bottom side up on the smoother waters below.

Two things in that sudden disaster were for the advantage of the voyagers: they were thrown clear of the overturned raft; and that abrupt fall marked the end of the rapids. Finding themselves in calm waters, therefore, when they arose to the surface, they struck out for the float, and after considerable exertion succeeded in pushing it to the shore. Here they took account of their losses.

One small package of provisions, which Rod had picked up while swimming to the raft; the sword of Mr. Barton, which he happened to have in his belt; two arrows and a bow belonging to Admaxla, and which were slung to the native's back; together with the precious gems, which were divided into five small parcels and concealed on the persons of the travellers,—these were their sole possessions. Everything

else, food, blankets, weapons, utensils, had disappeared in the depths of the river.

The castaways were now in a sore plight indeed,—drenched to the skin, without fire, with almost no food, and with no coverings, except the clothes they wore. Yet there was no complaining; and all set to work at once to remedy their situation as much as possible.

By the united efforts of all, the raft was turned right side up, and made fast to the bank. Then the professor started a fire with one of the three precious matches he still carried in his pocket-safe, fortunately a water-tight one. Then the little company gathered around the blaze, and as best they could dried their drenched clothing and what little food there was.

When this had been done, they set about repairing the damages to the float. These were fortunately but few, and were easily put in order. A new shelter was built, a new fire bed constructed, and a new fire started. By the time all these things had been attended to, it was too late to make another start that day, so after a scanty supper the wanderers retired to rest.

At an early hour the following morning, however, a fresh start was made, the voyagers

keeping a sharp lookout that the mishap of the previous day might not be repeated. But no new dangers were met with, and about noon the stream they were on merged its waters with those of a much larger river, which was flow-

ing to the northeast.

"Good!" exclaimed Professor Barton, as the float glided out into the larger stream; "we are now, no doubt, upon a direct branch of the Orinoco, and cannot be many days' journey from some settlement of white men. Let us press on as fast as possible, therefore, with our voyage. It may be that we, by putting ourselves on short rations, have enough to last until we reach the nearest town or village. If not, we can stop to hunt when our supply is exhausted. I, for one, believe the thing for us now to do is to push forward with the least possible delay."

To this his companions assented, and for the remainder of that day and all of the next, the voyage continued without interruption. But as they partook of their supper on the evening of the second day, the professor remarked,—

"We have now eaten the last mouthful of our provisions, and to-morrow we must devote to securing a new supply."

"There ought to be game enough about here," Todd put in, glancing up at the great forest which hemmed them in on all sides; "but with only a sword and bow and two arrows we run a small chance of getting any of it."

"We will try our best," Rod said; "then if we fail, we must go hungry. I see no other

way out of it."

"We can get fish," Admaxla remarked.

"How?" asked his companions, with interest.

"In the small stream a mile back," the native replied. Then he told how he could make a wickerwork net which could be stretched across the small brook, and the fish driven down into it.

An uneventful night passed, and as soon as it was light enough to see, the young Antalcan went into the woods for the material he needed to construct his fishing gear. With deft fingers he wove the vines he procured into a strip of netting twenty feet long and four feet wide. At its centre he set a basket or cage deep enough to prevent the fish from escaping when once they were driven into it.

"There," he said, as he completed the apparatus, "I think the professor and Todd can operate that all right. They have only to stretch it across the stream and fasten it with stakes; then going up the brook a few rods they are to wade down it, driving the fish before them into the netting, where they will be an easy prey. While they are doing that, Rod and I

will go hunting."

"I presume you say that because you think Rod and yourself are the best marksmen," Todd commented, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Well, I wager Professor Barton and I will bring back

the biggest load."

"Very likely," Admaxla admitted; "but we shall try to bring in something;" then, taking up the only sword they possessed, he fastened it to a stout stick with a piece of rope that he had cut off from the painter of the raft. "It isn't a handsome spear," he continued, when the task was finished, "but it is an ugly one, and even a jaguar had better not get in front of it. Take the bow and arrows, Rod, and come on."

Thus equipped, the two lads plunged into the forest to the north of their stopping place, while the professor and Todd, carrying the netting over their shoulders, went up the river in search of the small brook they had passed the night before. This left Mr. Todd in charge of the float.

A lonesome five hours followed for the manufacturer; but shortly after noon the fishermen returned, bringing with them a half dozen goodsized fish of some unknown species. Three of

these were promptly cleaned and put over the fire to cook, that a meal might be ready on the return of the hunters.

But hour after hour passed, and still they were absent. At length the manufacturer and his two companions became thoroughly alarmed, and were making ready to start out in search of the missing boys, when Admaxla came staggering down the bank, his face drawn and white, and his eyes filled with grief.

He was too exhausted to speak for some moments, but after food and water had been given him, was able to tell his story, a little at a time.

Rod and he had gone some distance down the stream without seeing game of any kind, and were almost ready to turn back, when suddenly some large animal started up from a thicket just ahead of them, and made off through the trees.

Rod, who was some distance in advance, hastened after the fleeing creature, calling out:—

"Come on, Admaxla! Here's food enough for a week, if we can only catch this fellow."

The native lad broke into a run, hoping to overtake his comrade, when he struck his foot against a root and fell headlong to the ground. Rising as quickly as possible, he found Rod

was already out of sight, but thinking little of that, he hurried on in the direction the boy had taken, expecting every minute to come in sight of him. When he had gone a half mile, however, without coming up with him, he became alarmed, and stopped to listen. Not a sound reached his ear. He shouted again and again, but no answer came. This way and that he ran, calling Rod by name until he was hoarse, but not a single trace of his missing companion could he find. He had disappeared as completely and suddenly as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

For hours the native lad kept up his search, halting at last from sheer weariness. Then he reasoned that Rod was probably all right, and would doubtless make his way back to the raft. So he set out on his own return, finding that he had wandered so far into the forest that it was with the greatest difficulty he reached the river again. When he finally came to the stream he, without stopping to quench his raging thirst, hurried on until in sight of the float. Then he saw that Rod was not there, and almost overwhelmed with his grief, was scarcely able to drag himself down the bank to the moored craft.

As the young Antalcan finished his story,

a silence fell upon the little group. It was at length broken by Mr. Todd, who said, with a sob in his voice,—

"We must try to find the lad at once, Mr. Barton."

"Indeed we must!" the aeronaut responded heartily; "but we must prepare for the search first. Night will soon be here, and we must have torches. The other fish must also be cooked, that we may have food here and to carry with us, that the missing lad may have something to eat the moment he returns or we find him. Think of it! He has not had a mouthful for nearly twenty-four hours now!"

The wisdom of these preparations was apparent to all, and the four voyagers were soon busily engaged in carrying them out. Torches were hastily provided from some resinous trees on the river bank; the fish were quickly baked; and then the rescuing party set forth. It consisted of the professor, Mr. Todd, and his nephew. Admaxla had begged earnestly to accompany them, but Mr. Barton said kindly:—

"No, my lad. You are already tired out; and it is needful that one of us should remain here in case Rod should come while the others are gone. Be brave and keep up a good heart."

All night the search was continued, but with-

out success. At dawn the searchers returned to the raft, only to find Admaxla alone. A needed rest was taken, more fish were caught and cooked, and for the second time the rescuing party went forth. The region was scoured for five miles around, but no signs of the missing lad appeared. It now seemed useless to continue the search; but at Mr. Todd's earnest request the voyage was delayed for another day, and one or two short trips were made into the forest. Like all the others, however, they were fruitless.

On the third day after the unfortunate disappearance of Rod, therefore, the little band, with sorrowful hearts, resumed their journey. This was absolutely necessary if they were to reach the coast alive, for their supply of food had given out, the small brook no longer furnishing its quota of fish; and the lack of suitable weapons (for their bow and arrows were in the possession of the lost boy) prevented them from securing any of the game with which the forest abounded. In truth, the voyagers now had but little hope of escaping from the wilderness. Weakened as they were, and without provisions, a settlement must be close at hand, or they should perish.

So disheartened were all that no watch was

kept, and little heed given to what was going on along the banks of the stream. In this way ten or twelve miles were covered, when Todd happened to look up. Then with a startled cry he arose to his feet, pointing ahead. The others, gazing in the direction indicated, saw on a point of land not far away an Indian encampment.

"Quick! We must run inshore," the professor cried excitedly; "until we can ascertain what kind of a reception they are likely to give us, we must hide in the woods;" and he began to work the great paddle vigorously.

"It is too late!" exclaimed Mr. Todd; "we

are already seen."

His declaration was true. A large canoe, in which were eight men, had already put off from the group of huts, and was headed directly for the raft.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RUBBER GATHERERS.

For some minutes the little group on the raft watched the oncoming canoe in silence. Would the Indians prove friendly? Or would they make them prisoners, and keep them for months, if not for life, as slaves? Or would they with cruel tortures put the entire party to death? Was this one more, and the last, link in the chain of misfortunes which had been winding itself about them during the last few days? Such were the thoughts in their minds as the distance between the two craft rapidly lessened.

Suddenly Todd cried out: -

"There is a white man in the boat, professor! and can it be—yes, it is, it is! Rod is alive and coming to meet us! Hurrah! Hurrah!" and the overjoyed lad danced madly about the raft.

A moment or two more and all were convinced of the truth of his assertion. For not only was the approaching boat near enough for

them to see that the person in its stern was indeed the boy whom they had given up as lost, but that personage, as though he desired to settle all question as to his own identity, now

arose and swung his hat high in the air.

With this salutation every misgiving of the voyagers vanished, and they put forth all their efforts to hasten the clumsy float down the current toward the ascending canoe. Nor was it long before the two craft were together, and Rod was in his father's embrace. So long did he hold the returned lad to his bosom, Professor Barton was led to say: -

"Give the rest of us a chance, Mr. Todd! The boy belongs to us almost as much as he

does to you!"

"Forgive me," the manufacturer murmured. "I forgot for the moment there were others to welcome him;" and releasing his son he allowed him to receive the greetings of his friends.

They were speedily and heartily given: the professor folding the boy to his breast; Todd giving him a regular bear's hug; and Admaxla, though a little less demonstrative, yet no less rejoicing at his coming, if the expression of his face was any criterion; for it fairly beamed with happiness and joy.

"Come, Rod," his cousin exclaimed when the greetings were over, "tell us how you came to be down here, and who these men are, and all about everything."

Rod gave a happy laugh. "It will take a long time to do that," he said. "I'll answer your second question first. These men are rubber gatherers, and that is their camp yonder. Professor Barton, you can talk Spanish; will you ask them to tow us ashore? They don't understand a word of English, and I've had a sorry time trying to make them comprehend me."

The aeronaut turned to the natives, who had remained in their canoe stolidly gazing at the animated party on the raft, and spoke a few sentences in Spanish. The Indians replied with a single word, upon which the professor threw them the line which was made fast to the front of the float. One of them dexterously caught the rope, while the others dipped their paddles and started for their village, pulling the larger and more unwieldy craft after them.

When they were well under way Professor Barton turned to Rod, saying:—

"I suppose we shall find food in plenty yonder? We have been on very short rations since you left us, and a square meal would not prove objectionable to any of us."

The lad assured him that there was an abundance of food in the camp of the natives, a statement soon put to the test; for in a moment or two more the settlement was reached, and the travellers disembarked. They now saw that the village consisted of a score of rude huts, inhabited by half a hundred men, women, and children. These came trooping down to the beach to inspect the strange visitors, and all stood about, talking rapidly in their native tongue.

The aeronaut now made known the wants of himself and comrades, and one of the men, who seemed to be a person of some authority in the encampment, led the way to the largest of the huts. Here a meal was quickly made ready, which, although rather coarse and not over clean, was none the less enjoyed by the wanderers. They were altogether too hungry to be over squeamish about their rations, and if the quantity eaten was any indication of their appreciation of the hospitality shown them, then their new friends must have felt highly complimented. When the meal had been finished, Rod told his story.

" As Admaxla has no doubt explained to you,"

he began, "we went for some distance down the stream without falling in with any game. Then suddenly from a thicket just in front of me there started up a large, brown animal, which I knew must be a tapir, although I had never seen one before.

"We were between the animal and the river, so it made off at a rapid pace into the woods. Shouting to Admaxla, who was a few rods behind me, to come on, I dashed away in pursuit of the animal. I had no idea the huge beast could run so fast, and expected we would soon overtake it. But the creature made much better speed through the forest than I could, and before I had gone a quarter of a mile it was so far ahead of me that I could no longer see it. However, I heard the noise it made as it crashed on through the underbrush, and followed the sound for some time longer.

"At length the tapir was so far in the lead I could no longer hear it, and so I halted, expecting to find Admaxla close behind me. To my alarm he was nowhere in sight, nor could I hear a sound except my own heavy breathing. I called aloud to him, but got no reply. I retraced, as I believed, the route I had followed, hallooing every few rods, and yet could neither see nor hear anything of the

lad. Then it came over me that he had missed me somehow, and was lost.

"Anxious on his account, and not once thinking of my own danger, I now set out in what I supposed to be the direction of the river, intending to secure help and continue the search for my comrade. For a half hour I travelled on, shouting at intervals, but receiving no answer, nor did I come to the desired stream. It was not until then it dawned upon me that I was the one who was lost.

"As this conviction came home to me I halted, and taking a careful survey of my surroundings, and of the sun which now and then peeped through the dense foliage over my head, I once more set out, as I now really believed, for the river. But when I had walked for a couple of hours, and still no stream appeared, I knew that for the second time I had made a mistake.

"After a few minutes of reflection I again started on, this time following a course at right angles to that which I had been pursuing. I tramped along until I was so faint and weary I could scarcely stand up, and then sat down on a fallen tree to rest. While sitting there I noticed a small bird at no great distance, and taking careful aim shot an arrow at it. To my

delight the shaft sped true to its mark, and the bird fell over — dead. Now that I had it, however, I was, in a sense, no better off than before, for I had no fire to cook it. But I realized that I must keep up my strength if I hoped to extricate myself from the forest, and so, having carefully cleaned the bird, I managed to swallow nearly half of the raw flesh. Although my stomach turned against the unsavory food at first, I soon felt the better for it, and resumed my tramp.

"I walked until about dark, and then came to the small river which flows, as you see, down the other side of this camp, and empties into the larger stream below the point. I knew at once that it was not the one on which we had been sailing, but I felt sure that it ran into it some miles farther down, so I had only to follow its bank and I should find you once more. The discovery infused me with new life, and but for the darkness I should have rushed on

down the brook.

"As it was, I made the best camp I could, and passed a very uncomfortable night. At dawn I ate the remainder of my bird, and then started down the stream. I walked all day without food of any kind, and without coming to the river's mouth. Tired, hungry, despair-

ing, I was about to lie down for another uncomfortable night, when I fell in with one of the rubber gatherers, who first gave me food from his own limited supply, and then conducted me

to this place.

"Though I could not speak a word of their language, or they a word of mine, I managed, by some rude drawings on the ground, to make them understand that I belonged to a small party that was coming down the big river on a raft. They assured me that no such craft had passed, and that I had but to wait here to rejoin you. Had you not come to-day, however, I should have arranged with the Indians to have taken me up the stream until we met you. Now tell me of yourselves."

Todd and Admaxla between them told of what had occurred since Rod's disappearance, and how they had given him up as irrevocably lost. They also told of their alarm on first dis-

covering the native camp.

At the conclusion of their conversation Professor Barton sought out their host, and held quite a lengthy interview with him. Later he made known to his companions what he had learned from the Indian.

"I find," said he, "that the river down which we have been floating on our raft is the Caroni,

a tributary of the Orinoco, as I believed. The smaller river which empties into it just below this encampment is called the Carapa.

"Our host and his friends are, as Rod has said, rubber gatherers, from down the Caroni, who come up here a few months each year in quest of gum. It is fortunate for us that we did not come along a few weeks later, for the season is nearly gone by, and we should not have found them here.

"The nearest permanent settlement is a small village some fifty miles farther down the river, which they say is called San Pedro. There we can secure transportation to any of the towns along the Orinoco. It seems to me best, therefore, to hire a canoe and a half dozen paddlers of this people to take us down to San Pedro. I have a small sum of money with me, and I presume you have also," turning to the manufacturer.

Mr. Todd nodded, saying: -

"I still have the amount which was in my wallet when we left New Orleans. But it is mostly in bills; will they be of any use among these natives?"

"I hardly think so," the aeronaut said slowly; "silver or gold is what we want. But need we pay them until at the settlement? If not, we

may find some one who will know the value of and take our currency."

"Labor is cheap here," Rod remarked, "and possibly we can make out silver enough between us. I have two dollars in quarters and halves, and Todd has nearly as much. Put it with what you and father have, professor, and see how much it will amount to all together."

This was soon done, and the sum was found to be ten dollars.

"I am quite sure our new friends will furnish us with a canoe for that," Mr. Barton said; "and on reaching San Pedro we shall have money enough in bills to take us to the coast. Once there, we can find an American consul who will supply the funds necessary to take us to the States. Was there ever anything more wonderful? This morning we were almost in despair; now we are reasonably sure of a speedy transport to our homes. Surely a kind Providence has watched over us throughout our unexpected and truly wonderful journey. But I will go and see about the boat."

"Would it not be well to wait a day or two before we begin the journey," Rod here suggested. "I for one feel the effects of the rough experiences we have been passing through in the last few days, and believe we shall all stand the remainder of our journey much better for a short rest."

"The suggestion is a good one," the aeronaut admitted; "and there is no reason why we should not follow it. Meanwhile I can make all the necessary arrangements for the trip with our host."

He had no difficulty in securing a large canoe, pulled by six stalwart natives, for the journey to San Pedro; and after three days of rest and recuperation, during which they watched with much interest the native methods of gathering rubber gum and preparing it for the market, the little party set forth in high spirits upon the next stage of their travels.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A GLAD HOME-COMING.

The united forces of current and paddles sent the stout canoe down the river at a rapid pace. As mile after mile of the forest disappeared behind them, Todd grew enthusiastic, and finally exclaimed:—

"This is the kind of craft we ought to have built, professor. How we should have dashed down the river! Why, I believe we shall reach

San Pedro to-day!"

The aeronaut laughed at the lad's enthusiasm. "We should have built just such a boat, Todd, if we had had the proper tools. But the old

raft, clumsy as it was, served us a good turn, and saved us from tramping many a weary mile; so I shall not wholly despise it. As for our reaching the settlement to-day, there is no question about it. Five hours at the paddle, two hours rest, and then four hours more with the blades, and we shall sleep in San Pedro to-night. That has been my expectation ever since we left the encampment."

"Hurrah!" cried all three lads, waving their dilapidated caps in the air.

Their exuberance of spirits was contagious; and it was not long before both the professor and manufacturer were as gleeful as their younger companions. The burden of anxiety they had borne for months had now lifted, and with the certainty that their dangers and deprivations were about over, they could whistle and sing and shout with the boys.

It was a very happy party, therefore, that sailed down the Caroni that day; and their stolid rowers must have regarded them the jolliest fellows they had ever met.

It was not yet sundown when the roofs of San Pedro came in sight, and a half hour later the voyagers were comfortably domiciled in the quaint town of about one thousand inhabitants.

Professor Barton's knowledge of Spanish enabled them not only to find suitable lodgings, but also to enter into negotiations with one of the leading merchants of the village for a transport down to the Orinoco.

This man, José Soniveras by name, had been in the United States, and was familiar with the appearance of the government greenbacks. His eyes glistened as he beheld the roll the professor showed him. Eagerly, but at a rate which meant an enormous profit to himself, he offered to furnish the castaways with clothing, transportation, and Venezuelan coins in exchange for the bills, saying,—

"I can cash them when I am up at Ciudad Bolivar, a town of twenty thousand inhabitants

on the Orinoco."

He also advised his prospective customers

to take transport for that city, adding: -

"Though you go up the Orinoco a few miles to reach it, you will really save time by doing so; for the place has a large export trade, and there are always vessels there in which you can secure passage to some seaport where there is a direct line of steamers to your country."

The advice of the merchant was followed, and his rate of exchange was gladly accepted, for the travellers were not in a position where they cared to stop and haggle over prices. When on the following day, therefore, they embarked upon a large sailboat for their voyage to Ciudad Bolivar, the last vestige of their long sojourn in the wilds of Venezuela had disappeared. Their long locks had been cut; Mr. Todd and the professor were cleanly shaven; and the whole party, including Admaxla, were dressed in new and serviceable clothing. Any

one falling in with them would have regarded them as a band of well-to-do tourists, visiting for pleasure or curiosity that unfrequented region.

For two days they sailed down the ever widening stream, through forest, amid plantations, by towns and villages, but on the morning of the third day came out into a river so broad and majestic that all recognized it as the long-sought Orinoco.

As the bow of their boat was turned up the great stream, Admaxla, who stood in front of the mast, staring at what was the broadest expanse of water he had ever seen, suddenly cried out:—

"Oh, Rod! what is that? One of the great boats you have told me about?"

The lad whose name had been called whirled around and looked in the direction the young Antalcan was pointing. Then he replied, —

"No! but it is a good-sized brig, and evidently outward bound."

His words attracted the attention of Professor Barton, who instantly gave an order in Spanish to the man at the helm of the sailboat; then he explained in English,—

"We will run near enough to hail the craft." In ten minutes they were able to make out

the name of the vessel: Maria Allen, Bristol, England. The aeronaut's first question, therefore, seemed almost superfluous:—

"Hello! on board the brig. Do you speak

English?"

"Ay, ay, sir; every mother's son of us," was the hearty response from the officer of the deck.

It took but a moment longer to learn that she was bound for the Port of Spain, in the island of Trinidad, and would willingly take the five voyagers as passengers. Here was an opportunity to reach a port in the regular line of steamer traffic which they could not afford to lose; and in five minutes the transfer had been made, and they were on the deck of the outward-bound vessel.

When the delta of the great river was reached, the master of the brig chose the most direct route to his destination, that of the Macareo branch, and so, on the morning of the fourth day after they boarded the *Maria Allen*, she cast anchor in the magnificent harbor of Port of Spain.

With all possible despatch the travellers hastened on shore, and visited the office of the

American consul.

"My name is Barton, and I and my comrades

were — "began the aeronaut as they faced the official.

"Run away with by your balloon and stranded in the wilds of South America," interrupted the officer. "I am glad to see you, professor, and you, too, Mr. Todd, and the lads as well. Excuse me a moment while I cable your appearance to the States; then I'll hear your story."

He called a clerk, sent him out with a cablegram, and then turned to his visitors again.

"Surprised that I should know all about you, aren't you?" he asked. "Well, it is easily explained. One of the messages you threw over from the balloon was found and reported. Thereupon Mr. Rodman — your brother-in-law Mr. Todd, and the father of one of these lads — cabled every consul in South America a full description of your party, and instructed them to be on the lookout for you. I'm glad it is my good fortune to announce your return to civilization. Tell me now of yourselves, and how I can serve you."

In accordance with an agreement already entered into by the travellers to make public as little of their story as possible, Professor Barton replied:—

"We landed several hundred miles south of the Orinoco, and in a wild and mountainous region. What natives we fell in with proved friendly; and we were at length able to make our way north to the Caroni River. Thence we came to the Orinoco, where we met the British captain who brought us here. Of course we experienced the many hardships incidental to such a journey; but they are over, and now we want to get home."

"I should think likely," the consul remarked good-naturedly; "and fortunately for you, there is a tramp steamer in port that sails directly for New York to-day. I am to give her her clearance papers at noon, and I think I can secure you berths on her. My clerk will show you to the nearest hotel, where I will report to you. Of course whatever funds you need I am prepared to furnish," and he turned his attention to another caller who had just come in.

An hour later they were notified that their passage home had been arranged for, and at one o'clock they were to go on board the steamer. There was barely time, therefore, to attend to a little necessary shopping, and to cable to their friends the name of the vessel on which they were to sail, before the hour for their departure arrived; and when the sun set, they were miles out upon the bosom of the last stretch of water between them and their native land.

Though not as fast as one of the greyhounds of the ocean, the *Proctor* was in no sense a slow boat, and ten days later she was off Sandy Hook. It was the last of February, and the day was bitter cold, so the passengers, just out of the tropics, kept in the warm and cosey cabin. They were aware that the steamer suddenly slowed up, and that a tug came alongside, but supposing the incident had something to do with the health or revenue officers, thought no more of it, until the cabin door was thrown open, and a gentleman and three ladies descended the stairs.

Then all sprang to their feet, and there was a meeting so tender and sacred we must leave it to the imagination of the reader rather than attempt to describe it. But what that meeting was can be imagined when we say the newcomers were Mrs. Barton, Mrs. Todd, and Mr. and Mrs. Walter Rodman. Anxious to see their long-absent ones at the earliest moment, they had chartered a tug-boat and come down the harbor to meet the *Proctor* as soon as her approach was announced.

During the conversation that now followed, the returning party learned that when the message of Professor Barton was received, his wife, without a near relative of her own, had gone to Bayville, and from that hour made her home with Mrs. Todd, comforting and strengthening her heart with her calm assurances that the castaways would yet be heard from.

"My husband has been in many experiences like this," she would say, "and always got safely out of them. Of course it may be months before we can hear from him, but the first we know there will come a cablegram telling us he and his comrades are all safe;" and she had proved a true prophetess.

There was no reason for any delay in New York, so the entire party, including Admaxla, who was already a great favorite with the women, took the train at once for Bayville. Their arrival there was not only the sensation of the town, but of the whole country, and representatives of all the leading journals hastened to interview the returned aeronauts, and in some instances offered a fabulous price for the story of their wanderings. To all, however, Professor Barton returned one and the same answer,—

"The experiences which grew out of our aerial runaway will in due time be given to the public; but it must be in our own time, and in our own way."

It was so late in the season, Rod and Todd

did not return to school until the following fall. Meantime they became the self-appointed teachers of Admaxla, and it was astonishing what progress the young Antalcan made. So great was this, that he was prepared for a regular tutor when the cousins reëntered the academy; and when, two years later, our young heroes went to a well-known Polytechnic School to prepare themselves, Rod for an electrical and Todd for a civil engineer, the young Antalcan was able to attend the same institution for a course in the mechanical arts, all his expenses being met, of course, by an occasional sale of one of the gems brought from his far-away home. The intention of the youths, as can readily be seen from the studies they are pursuing, is to fit themselves for the development of Admaxla's land and people.

Note: — At the request of Admaxla this manuscript has been withheld from publication until he could complete his studies, obtain from the Venezuelan government a recognition of the claims of his people to Mount Roraima and its surrounding district, secure the hidden treasure of his nation, and return to the plateau. Now that these objects have been accomplished, the story of the "Aerial Runaway" and the adventures it led to are for the first time given to the public.

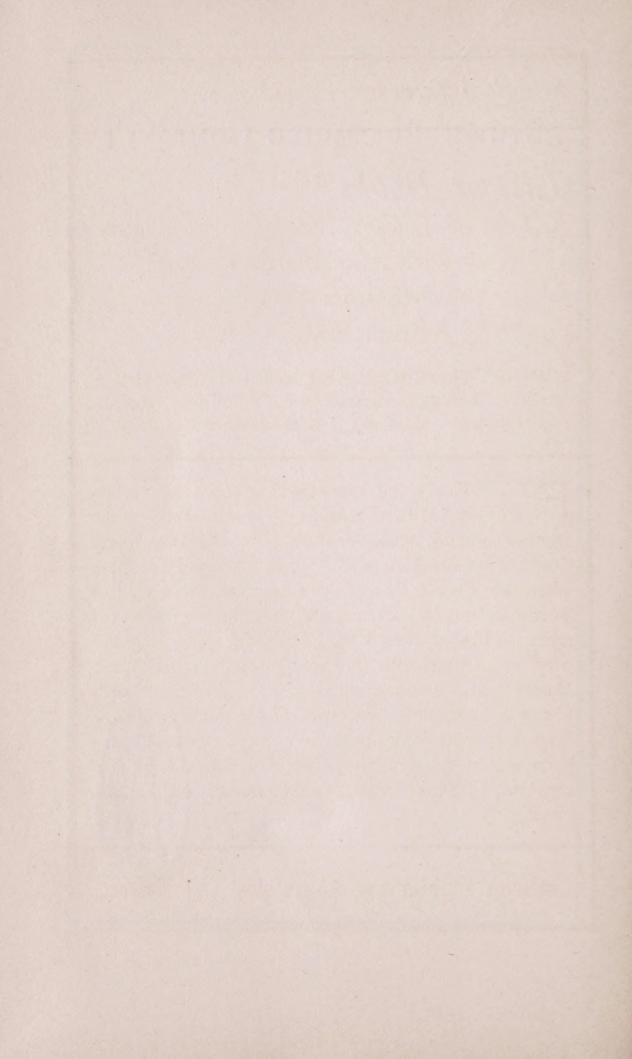


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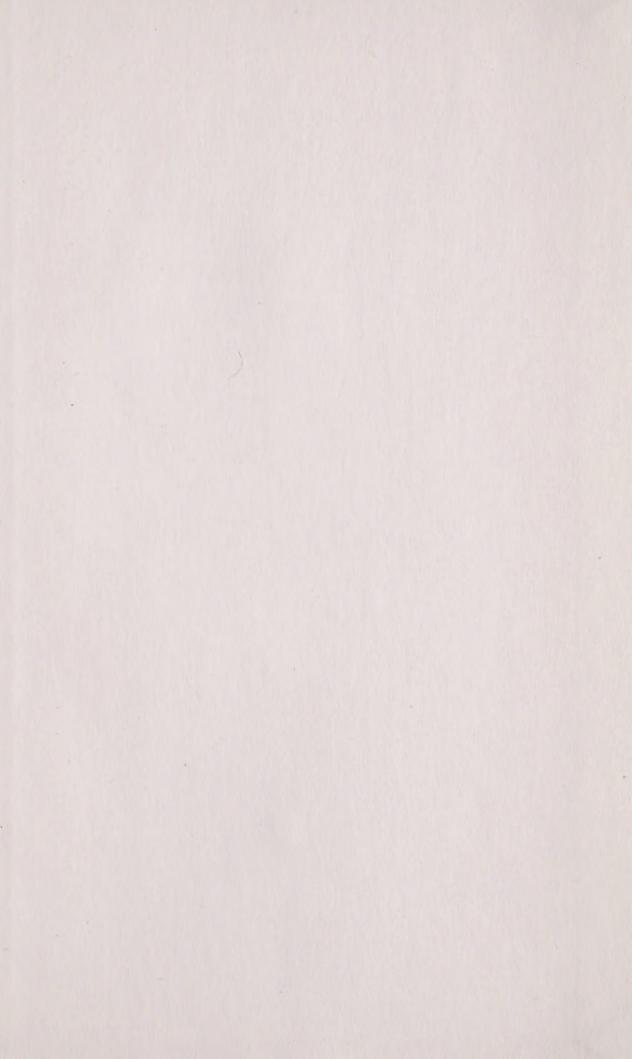
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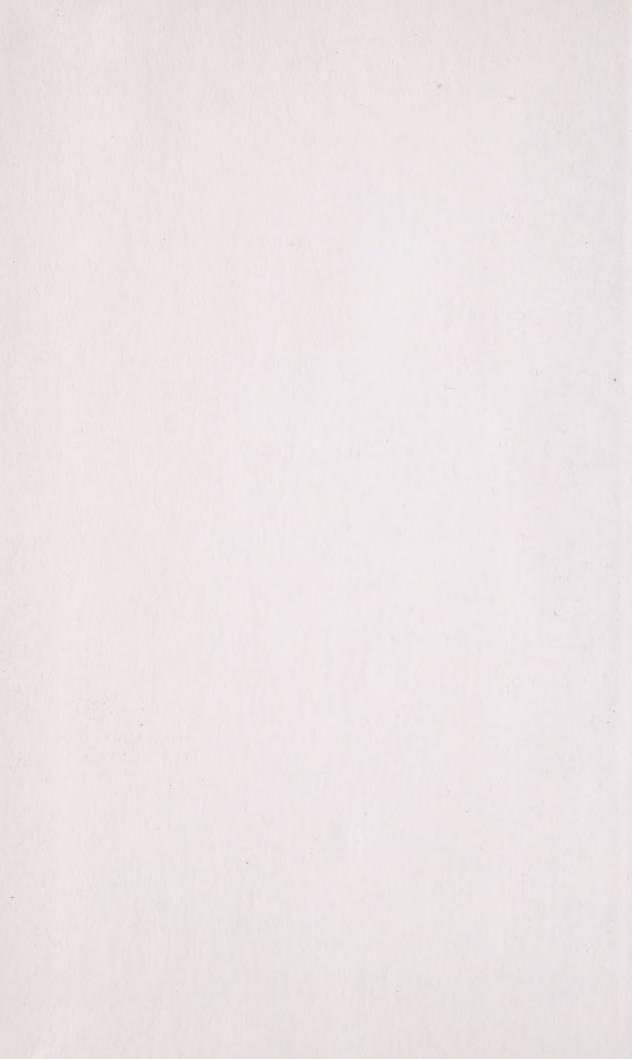
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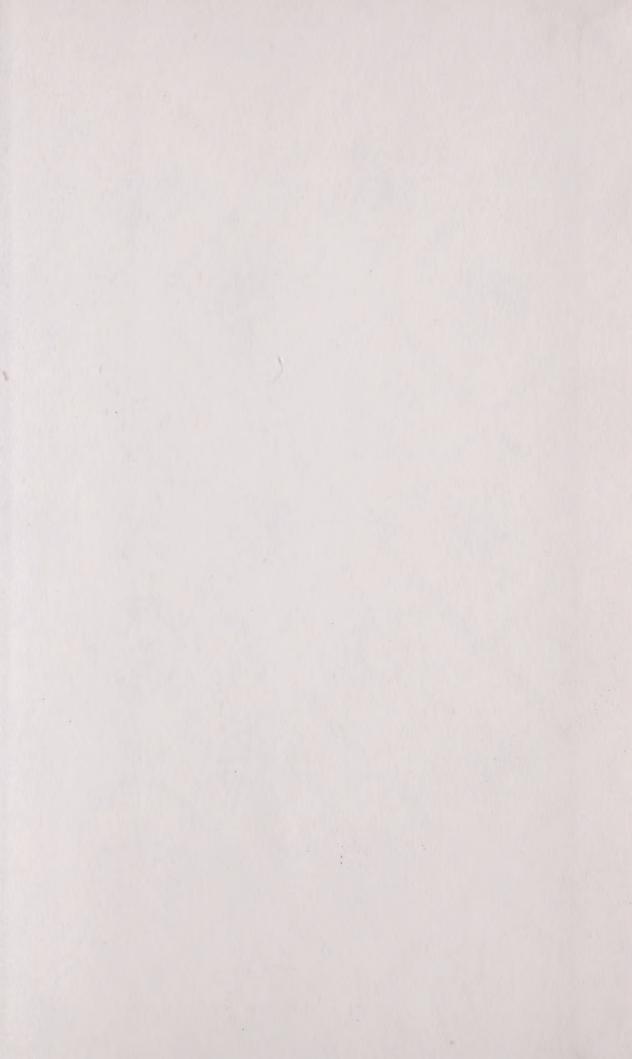
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